THE TRIFLER

ARCHIBALD EYRE

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"'If you open that parcel I will prosecute you,' cried Trefusis, rather wildly."

The Trifler

A LOVE COMEDY

BY

ARCHIBALD EYRE

ILLUSTRATED BY ARCHIE GUNN

1903
The Smart Set Publishing Co.
NEW YORK LONDON

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First Printing Oct.

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CHAPTER I

MY BROTHER'S MARRIAGE

AFTER a courtship that lasted only a few months my brother Gerald married and departed on his honeymoon. As a younger brother, not too well endowed with this world's goods, and dependent for comfortable living on his good will, I sighed a little as I performed the functions of best man. He had allowed forty years to pass without evincing any desire for matrimony; he had assured me frequently that he was "wedded" to political life; and only a few months previously he had been elevated to Cabinet rank. Certainly, none of these things entitled me to assume that he would never marry, but as he was fifteen years my senior, and seemed quite remarkably old for his age, I had gradually convinced myself that he would always remain a bachelor.

However, the unexpected happened, and if anyone was to blame, I suppose I was, for I had intro-

duced him to Mabel Fielders at Henley. If my brother *had* to get married, he could not have made a better choice, for Mabel was very pretty, not too young, and of excellent family.

I called just after their engagement was announced, and happened on one of the rare occasions when she was alone.

"So you are actually going to marry my big brother?" I said, with a melancholy shake of my head. "I do hope you won't regret it."

"Regret it? No, I do not think I shall regret it." There was a soft light in her eyes and a delicate tinge on her cheek.

"You mustn't let him bore you with his politics."

"Oh, I take a tremendous interest in politics. It is delightful that your brother is in the Cabinet. I am quite looking forward to—to helping him."

"I suppose you will start a *salon,* and all that sort of thing," I said a little ironically, for it was amusing to learn that Mabel was so keenly interested in political affairs.

"I am sure we shall be very happy, and—and—I hope you will always look on me as a sister—a very dear sister."

"Oh, certainly," I replied, readily enough. Mabel was always pretty, but I have noticed that when a girl gets engaged to a man for whom she

cares, her looks immediately improve. "What a lot of new brothers I shall have," I added.

"What do you mean?" asked Mabel. "I am an only child, as you know."

"I thought that perhaps you had promised to be a sister to all those scores of unhappy men you must have rejected in my brother's favor."

"No nice girl has to refuse scores of men," she returned indignantly. "And, even if she had, she would not offer to be their sister. I am afraid you take your views of women from the comic papers."

"How did you manage, then?" I went on idly. "You must have had lots of experience."

"I have not," she asserted warmly. "You seem to think I have been a heartless flirt."

"Oh, no," I replied politely. "By the way, I haven't seen George Trefusis lately."

She was putting a lump of sugar into a teacup, and the lump missed the cup and fell into the saucer. She looked up with a scared expression. "Whatever put Mr. Trefusis into your head?"

"I cannot follow the association of ideas." But I noticed she could, for her face had lost something of its brightness. "It just occurred to me that I had not seen him lately."

"He went to Australia," she replied constrainedly.

"For good?"

"Oh, no. Only to look after some property there. I believe he will be back shortly."

"He will be glad to hear of your engagement. You were great friends."

"Were we?"

"Were you not?"

"I don't know." She handed me my cup and sat down in an armchair, staring abstractedly out of the window.

The conversation seemed in danger of collapsing. "I knew Trefusis at Oxford," I threw in, to keep it going.

She turned quickly towards me. "Did you know him well?"

"Yes, fairly well."

She dropped her voice. "And did you like him?"

"No, I can't say I did."

She sat up in her chair. "But at first—when you first knew him?" she asked eagerly.

"I think he rather attracted me at the outset," I owned rather reluctantly.

She gave a little sigh. "That is the experience of everyone who meets him."

"Trefusis is a mystery," I observed, "and I am not sure I want to know the solution."

"He has such nice eyes," she continued dreamily. "Such beautiful, brown, faithful, dog-like eyes. He is so frank and boyish in manner."

"In manner—yes."

"So handsome and polite and considerate."

"He does appear so."

She frowned thoughtfully. "That's just it! And in reality——"

"In reality——"

"Oh, I don't know what he is in reality. Does anyone? Do you?"

"I am sure I don't."

"Then why did you say you didn't like him?"

"Did I say so?"

"Of course you did."

"I don't know why I don't like him."

"Have you ever known him to do a mean thing?"

I hesitated. "Well, I am not certain, but somehow or other if——"

"If what?"

I drew my chair closer to hers. "I don't know if you have noticed," I said confidentially, "that some misfortune invariably happens to anyone who offends him. We noticed it at Oxford. It became a byword."

Mabel looked at me with startled eyes. "I have

noticed it, too," she whispered. "It is very curious. Quite little things, too. Do you remember old Lady Tremayne insisting that he had negro blood in his veins, and then just a few days later she——"

"I remember. Oh, I could tell you heaps of things like that. And yet I have never been able to feel certain he was really to blame. It is simply curious."

She gave a little shiver. "Do you know he frightens me? And yet I don't know why."

I nodded. "I knew the feeling. The more you know him, the less you know him. At first you imagine he has a transparent nature. And then you are not sure. Then you are sure he has not. Finally you can't believe anything too bad to be true of him."

Mabel drew a long breath. "For some months," she said, "I thought he was charming. I even thought I——" She stopped suddenly, and her cheeks reddened.

"He is not a man of whom I would care to make an enemy," said I. "Not that I am afraid of him."

"Isn't it turning cold?" asked Mabel. She shivered again perceptibly. I rose and shut the window.

"However," I continued, as I turned towards her, "I am not very likely to be his enemy, so his little idiosyncrasies don't interest me much."

"And I," remarked Mabel more cheerfully, "shall be married before he is back in England. Let us talk of something else."

CHAPTER II

A TANGLED WEB

OWING to my absence from town on a cricketing tour, I saw nothing of my brother and his bride till some months after their wedding. The few letters I received from him betrayed an ecstasy which is only pardonable in the recently married. I was glad he was happy, for with all his faults I am fond of him. The law of primogeniture had given him the bulk of the family property, but, to make up for this, he had always acted towards me with more than brotherly generosity. He was an earnest worker, reveling in detail, with the capacity for taking infinite pains which, certainly in his case, was not allied to genius. In the House of Commons his position had been won by sheer industry. He was listened to with respect rather than with interest. As a debater he did not shine, though he had been known to overwhelm even redoubtable opponents by the sheer weight of facts, uttered without eloquence, but clearly arranged and carefully marshaled. I knew he regarded me as a mere trifler, which, to

tell the truth, I was. His endeavors to put me to some profitable work were many and fruitless. In my boyhood I had desired to enter the army, but he had opposed my wish with his characteristic persistence. Our father and mother had died when I was still in long frocks, and his fifteen years' seniority made his veto a decisive one. His reason was that the military career was a non-productive one, that there were temptations to extravagance, which, from his knowledge of my character, he judged I should not be able to resist. I dare say he was right, and, in any case, I did not greatly care.

On leaving Harrow I went to Oxford, and at the time of my brother's marriage had wasted two or three years "about town." When my brother entered the Cabinet he offered to make me his secretary. Under the influence of his precept and example, he hoped in time I should exhibit the qualities of steady industry in which he himself excelled. I excused myself not very graciously. With the allowance my brother made me I had about eight hundred a year, a dangerous sum for a man of my indolent proclivities, and I was quite determined to leave "steady industry" to those whose motive force was a desire for bread. My brother was, I am sure, genuinely attached to me,

but, as might be expected, there were times when our relations were strained.

I could have wished that he did not take so much interest in me. He had a pet belief that the capacity for steady application was synonymous with brain-power. As a direct consequence, he imagined that I was mentally deficient. It pleased him to press on me the lessons of his experience, gained not merely in the highways of life, but in such unimportant by-paths as Tattersall's or Newmarket. If he heard I contemplated buying a horse, he would send me urgent messages to do nothing till he could be present to assist me. It was his fixed belief that he alone could save me from being swindled right and left. Of course I was many years younger, but I do believe that at twelve I was a better judge of horseflesh than Gerald at forty.

This craze of his—to regard me as an easy prey for sharpers, and to assume towards me an attitude more paternal than brotherly—was one of the reasons that reconciled me to his marriage. As a married man he would have interests which might be expected to distract his attention from an unworthy younger brother. I confess, too, I half expected that Mabel would endeavor to convince him that I had my share of mental acumen, if only

from gratitude for my part in finding her a husband.

When I got back to town I found awaiting me one of those ornate letter cards which notify the days on which a bride is at home to her friends. My first free afternoon happening to coincide with one of these days, I turned my steps in the direction of my brother's house. As I walked down Brook Street I saw someone wave a parasol violently from the window of a brougham, and I heard a female voice calling on the coachman to stop. On recognizing Mabel's mother as the owner of the parasol, I crossed the road to speak to her.

"You're back, are you?" the old lady cried as I approached. "What a stranger you are! Have you seen Mabel yet?"

"I am just on my way," I replied.

"It's no good going to-day," she responded. "I've just come from her. She says she's ill."

"Ill?"

"Nothing at all, or only a headache. Probably eaten something that doesn't agree with her."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. Be sorry for me. She was as cross as two sticks. She said I annoyed her. Nice way to talk to a mother." Mrs.

Fielders smiled cheerfully from the carriage window. Evidently the affront had not pierced deeply.

"This is one of her reception days, isn't it?"

Mrs. Fielders nodded. "Very silly of Mabel. Quite well, really. Hundreds being turned from the door. Not that they mind. Probably very glad."

"I had better call," I said. "Perhaps Gerald is in."

"Don't think so. At the House, I expect. Good-by. Come and see me some day." And she drove off, the shrewdest and most good-natured of old ladies.

When I reached my brother's house the footman received me with a cordial smile. I am inclined to think my prowess on the cricketing field commends me to his class. He told me that my brother was out and Lady Trewint was ill, but he would take up my name, in case—— So he took up my name, and came back to say her ladyship was far too ill to see me, but that I was to come in and have some tea.

"Oh, no, thanks!" I said; and nodding to the man, I made my way into the road. I had not reached the corner of the square when the shrill "Hi! hi!" of a small errand-boy made me aware

that the powdered footman was pursuing me. I turned and waited his approach.

"Her ladyship will be glad to see you, please, sir," he said, trying not to pant.

"I'll go back." So I turned back, but was met at the front door by Mabel's maid.

"Her ladyship is afraid that, after all, she is too unwell to see you, sir. But she hopes you will have some tea."

"Oh, bother!" I responded, annoyed at these sudden changes on Mabel's part.

"It won't take a minute to get it, sir," said the maid so pleadingly that I gave in.

I went into the smoking room and helped myself to one of my brother's cigars. Although he insists on choosing mine for me, I have noticed he himself smokes a different brand.

With the tea was brought a message that Mabel would make a great effort to see me. I settled down for a quiet read, for, knowing Mabel, I guessed the "effort" meant putting on a becoming dress. Half an hour elapsed before I received the expected summons to repair to her boudoir. When I entered she was stretched on a couch in a picturesque attitude, with a look of profound melancholy on her face. She put out her hand languidly.

"I am very ill," she said plaintively. "So very, very ill. On the whole, I think I should like to die."

"Is it so bad?" I asked sympathetically. "But to tell the truth, I have never seen you look better."

"Really?" she asked, not altogether displeased. "I assure you I feel perfectly worn out."

"You look charming, nevertheless."

I know few so susceptible to compliments as Mabel. She brightened up at once. Raising herself on her elbow, she screwed her head round in the direction of the door. "Is it shut?"

"Yes."

She sank back on her cushions and put a lace handkerchief to her eyes. "Oh, Fred," she wailed, "I am most miserable."

"Bless me, has Gerald——"

"Gerald is a dear," she responded severely.

"Oh, I thought that, perhaps——"

"Certainly not. Oh, I wish all men were as kind as Gerald. But they are not. Some men are—brutes."

I waited for an explanation.

"Nothing will induce me to tell you," she said at length.

"To tell me what?"

"What has upset me so terribly."

"Your mother thinks that you have been eating something that——"

She interrupted me with a little shocked cry of protest.

"Mamma always says these horrid things. Oh, no, it's much worse than that."

"A mental worry?" I suggested.

She assented. "And I don't know what on earth I shall do. What will Gerald think? And everybody will laugh and say ill-natured things. I shan't dare to show my face. Oh, it is wicked, wicked!"

I drew my chair in closer. "Once you promised to be my sister. And when you are in trouble, should you not confide in your brother?"

She looked at me doubtfully. "Oh, no, I simply can't tell you," she said at length. "You might tell Gerald."

"Certainly not," I replied firmly. "He is the last person in the world I should tell."

"Oh, no, I can't tell you." At the same time, however, she fumbled beneath her cushions and drew forth a pretty little booklet in a white parchment cover, ornamented with blue ribbons.

"What is that?" I asked curiously.

She thrust it back among the cushions. "You didn't see? Oh, I hope you didn't see."

"I saw nothing."

She drew forth the book again very slowly. "Promise me you won't look inside."

"Very well."

She handed it to me, and then buried her face among the cushions. "Isn't it awful?" she moaned.

I took the little book in my hands, and fixed my eye-glass. On the white cover, in old English letters, printed in gold, were the words, "The Love Letters of Miss Mabel Fielders, now Lady Trewint," and underneath, in smaller characters, "For private circulation only."

"Whatever does this mean?"

"Oh, I am so miserable!" came in muffled accents from the cushions.

The thought in my mind was that Gerald, from imbecile admiration of his wife's literary style, had printed her letters to him, and was about to circulate them amongst his friends. But this seemed too absurd to be possible.

"Did Gerald do this?" I asked.

"Gerald!" She raised her head and looked at me with eyes round with amazement. "As if Gerald——" Then the tension relaxed, and she dropped back upon her cushions. "Gerald is quite right," she remarked pityingly, "you *are* stupid."

"Perhaps I am," I replied, rather annoyed. "But you leave too much to my intelligence. I assume this pamphlet contains your letters to Gerald?"

"No, it doesn't," she answered tartly.

"It contains your letters, however?"

She did not answer, but there was no denial on her face.

"Love letters of yours, but not to—Gerald?"

"Oh, dear; oh, dear!"

"May I read them?"

"Oh, no; on no account." Her face flamed suddenly to the color of a brilliant sunset.

"But why have they been printed?"

She began to cry. "To make me miserable," she sobbed. "To make Gerald angry. Oh, it's a shame, a shame!"

"To whom were they written?"

"I don't want to say."

"You must." I think my voice had suddenly become grave. "You must tell me everything. You have written letters you are ashamed of, and someone has got hold of them and printed them. Is it blackmail, or revenge, or what?"

"Revenge," she replied in a whisper.

"But—but——" A sudden fear possessed me. No one likes the breath of scandal to blow near his

home. "Surely, Mabel," I said, "there is nothing in these letters you are really afraid Gerald should see? Gerald is not romantic. He will hardly expect you never to have had little, harmless love passages before you met him. That would be absurd. Tell me, there is nothing in these letters that would really injure you in Gerald's eyes."

"Yes, yes; there is," she cried. "There are things I would rather die than let him see. I could never look him in the face again if he read these letters."

I pushed back my chair and rose. "You mean," I said coldly, "that these letters compromise you?"

She looked up tragically. "If by that you mean that they will make me seem wholly absurd and ridiculous, and make everybody scoff and Gerald angry; yes, they compromise me."

I breathed again. "That is all? They will only make you ridiculous. Ridiculous! Who cares for ridicule?"

"I do," said Mabel. "I can't bear to be made a laughing stock for the world's amusement. You must help me, Fred. I am sorry I said you were not clever, for you are, you know. I am sure you will be able to think of something. Only you mustn't waste time. A copy of this book may be

sent to Gerald any day. And then it will be too late to do anything."

"What makes you think that?"

"The book says so. Read the preface—only the preface. It is on the first page."

So I opened the book, and under the heading of "Introductory Note," read as follows:

"The following letters are given to the world from a single-hearted desire to clear the fame of an unhappy lady. Many harsh epithets have been used to describe her conduct, but her letters will show that she has been the victim of a compulsion alike persistent and cruel, which, acting on her gentle nature, has forced her to sacrifice her own and another's happiness. The letters are printed without the knowledge or consent of the writer or of the recipient. By a curious conjunction of circumstances they fell into the hands of a third party, who feels it to be an imperative duty to clear the character of one for whom nothing but the deepest pity can be felt from the accusations of fickleness and inconstancy to which she has been exposed. Copies will be circulated only among the friends and acquaintances of the unfortunate lady, and it is hoped thereby to reinstate her in their good opinion."

I read this through twice, and then a third time.

"I am still in the dark," I said. "Are you the 'unhappy lady'? And who is the person desirous of reinstating you in your friends' good opinion?"

Mabel sat up suddenly, and her eyes sparkled with anger. "It is all a pretense to say they were printed without the consent of the recipient. How could they fall into the hands of a third party? He has done it himself. I am absolutely sure of it. It is just the thing he would do, the nasty, malicious——"

I interrupted her. "I think I begin to understand, but tell me about it right from the beginning. You needn't mention names, you know, if you don't want to."

She flung a cushion rather violently from her. "Oh," she cried, "I think I could almost kill him if I met him."

"Tell me all about it."

She sat fidgeting for some moments, and then she jumped off the sofa and commenced to walk up and down the room. "He pretended to be in love with me," she began, with an angry sob. "And I—I really did like him. He was so good-looking and nice, and his eyes were quite lovely, and I felt quite sure I was in love with him. He

wanted me to marry him, but mother could not bear him."

"Go on."

"Well, at the time I felt I could never love anyone else, and so we got engaged secretly. I never told mother. It was not a real engagement, you know. Once he asked me if I loved him, and I said—I said——"

"Quite so."

"Well, after that he took it for granted we were engaged. And I wrote him one or two stupid letters. But after a month or so I began to feel I didn't like him. Somehow or other, he—frightened me. I couldn't understand him. He used to say such strange things, and sometimes there was a curious gleam in his eyes. At last I felt that, instead of loving him, I simply hated and loathed him so much that I shuddered when he came near. But I didn't care to tell him, and so I let things drift on, though I had quite made up my mind never to marry him."

"Well?"

"Then, luckily, he had to go abroad, and very soon after I met Gerald. It was at Henley, you remember. What a lovely Henley that was! And you know"—she blushed—"Gerald fell in love with me very quickly."

"That was only to be expected," I observed, "but please go on."

"Of course, I ought to have told Gerald I was in a way engaged to—to the other one. But I didn't." She looked at me appealingly. "I am a terrible coward. But I wrote. Oh, yes, I wrote as soon as your brother showed that—that he cared for me."

"Oh, you wrote to the other man?"

"Yes. He was far away—in Australia, as a matter of fact—and was not to be back for some months. It was rather difficult to write—so awkward to explain!"

"It must have been."

"However, I never dreamt anyone but he would see my letter. I never thought he would print it in a book! If I had only thought that——"

"You would have written quite differently?"

"Quite," she replied naïvely. "You see what a difficult position I was in. I didn't want him to think I was jilting him. I thought it would be ever so much better to pretend that——"

"That you were being forced into the marriage?"

"Well, yes. How clever of you to guess that! I thought it would be ever so much nicer for him. It would hurt his pride to feel that I had thrown

him over. Oh," she cried in sudden gust, "I did it all for the best!"

"And so——"

"And so I pretended that mamma—poor, dear mamma—was forcing me to marry your brother, and I pretended I hated Gerald, and still loved—the other man. It was really very difficult, but I felt sure it was for the best."

"And all your letters are in this book?"

"Every one," she sighed. "They read so dreadfully in print. I had no idea I had put it so strongly. Whatever would Gerald think, especially as I rather pressed on our marriage. I had to, you know. It would have been horrid if the other man had come rushing home before we had got married."

"It would have been inconvenient."

"Luckily, Gerald was as anxious as I was to get the wedding over. So that turned out all right. Oh, dear"—she drew in a deep breath, "you have no idea how worried I have been."

"I can imagine," I said, "that your worries are not over."

She gave me a frightened look. "Oh, you must put a stop to these books being circulated. You must get hold of them and burn them. You must get back the original letters. You must——"

"More easily said than done."

"Oh, Fred, dear, you will do this for me?" The tears were in her eyes, and she spoke so pleadingly that I agreed to do my best.

"All the same," I said judicially, "the best course will be to tell Gerald all about it."

"Oh, no." She shook her head decisively. "You see, Gerald is so serious-minded. Of course, I quite see I may have to tell him; but, oh, I want you to arrange things so that it will not be necessary. I am sure you can. I have such confidence in you."

"Have you, indeed?" I observed rather grimly. It is pleasant to excite confidence, but it has its drawbacks. "You haven't mentioned the man's name, but I have guessed it."

She turned towards me excitedly. "Tell me what you think of him? Hasn't he acted in a low, disgraceful manner?"

"He has certainly not acted like a gentleman." In my heart I was full of indignation towards Trefusis. "Of course we have no proof that the letters were not printed as stated in the preface."

"Nonsense!" she cried. "It is just his deceitful way of injuring me without personal responsibility."

"I agree," I replied thoughtfully. "But it is rather ingenious. Has he written or spoken to you since your marriage?"

"Not a single word. I have not even seen him."

I rose. "Well, Mabel, I must think it over. It is a jolly awkward mix-up. At the same time, I don't believe Trefusis will send these books round to your friends. The pretext that they were sent out by a third party is rather weak, and he must realize that people would not believe it."

"Would he mind whether they believed it or not?"

"I think so. It would be considered a dirty trick, and he would get cut by all decent people. Very likely the committee of his club would give him a hint to clear out. Altogether, he would ultimately be the loser. Now, Trefusis is always careful of his own skin, I've noticed."

"Then you think——"

"I feel sure his motive is merely to worry and distress you. I don't believe he will let Gerald see these letters—not at present, at any rate. That would bring things to an issue, and I am certain that is not what he wants."

"If Gerald does not see them, I don't care a bit. Oh," she went on, clasping her hands, "just think

of Gerald reading all my rubbish about not loving him, and being forced to marry him against my will, and all that. What would he think of me?"

"The whole business is really very unpleasant. The fear of disclosure will always be hanging over your head, and you will feel that you are at this man's mercy. I really do advise you to tell Gerald."

"I can't; I won't."

I walked about the room rather irritably. "I hate the idea of my brother's wife being in the power of another man, especially of a man like Trefusis."

"Help me to get out of his power."

"Yes, yes; I am going to try, of course. But really, Mabel, I cannot help feeling that your conduct——"

"Oh," she cried plaintively, "now you are going to scold me. I know I deserve it; still, I have been terribly punished, and—and——" She produced her handkerchief.

"Well, don't cry. And now I must go. Good-by, Mabel."

She took my hand. "Thank you so very, very much. And oh, Fred, on no account fight or hit him. That will mean a scandal, and the whole

thing will come out. Don't rely on brute force, Fred."

"I must do what I can," I returned, much out of humor. "Good-by, again."

"Good-by, dear Fred."

CHAPTER III

MORE WORRY

I LEFT the house with a feeling of vague discomfort. I should have to see Trefusis, demand the letters, make a scene, or do something equally alien to my easy-going nature. I was annoyed with Mabel for acting so foolishly, but in blaming her, I realized I was only condemning a feminine characteristic; for women of all ages and at all times have endeavored, probably from a natural instinct of self-preservation, to circumvent danger by gentle fibbing.

On leaving my brother's house I strolled leisurely in the direction of my club. Just as I had agreed with a friend to play a "hundred up," a waiter came to tell me I was wanted at the telephone. I went to the instrument to discover my brother at the other end.

"Is that you, Fred?" said he.

"Yes. How are you? Called on you this afternoon, but——"

"Very busy. Bill in Committee. Most interesting discussion. By the way, how is Mabel?"

"Oh, much better."

"Fred, Fred, are you there? I want you to—— No, we are *not* finished——I want you to get in a cab and come here."

"Where is 'here'?"

"The House."

"Oh, oh, yes."

"John Telby has just been to see me. He wants——"

"Who the deuce is John Telby?"

"Really, Fred, you are shockingly ignorant. He owns the engineering works at Trewint. You *must* know."

"Oh, yes; of course."

"*No,* we are *not* finished——He is standing for Trewint, you know. Renton has accepted a judgeship. I want to introduce you to him."

"Oh, I don't want to know him."

"Really, Fred, you are a most——Do go away and don't worry——aggravating. He wants me to go down and make a speech in his favor, but it's absurd. I simply can't."

"Oh, why not? I thought you rather liked making speeches."

"I can't hear what you say. I am up to my eyes in work, and, besides, it isn't quite the thing for ministers to take part in by-elections. But I

agree with him it is desirable the family influence should be used in his favor. So you must go down and take the chair at some of his meetings."

"Oh, hang it all!"

"Yes, Fred; I must insist. I know you are unfit, and will probably make a perfect exhibition of yourself, but——"

"Really, Gerald!" I protested.

"I say—are you there, Fred? On the whole, perhaps you had better not come to the House. I shall be too occupied to talk to you even if you do come."

"In these circumstances, I won't come."

"Look here, Fred, Telby and his daughter, and his son, too, I think, are dining with us to-morrow. Turn up, will you? Dinner at eight. Do you hear, Fred?"

"Yes. I hear, but——"

"Good-by." And then the bell rang off.

I left the telephone decidedly ruffled. There seemed to be a general conspiracy against my innocent desire for a peaceful life. I dislike politics; I loathe elections; I hate being brought into violent conflict with other men. The thought of taking the night train for the Continent crossed my mind; but, of course, I could not leave Mabel in her dilemma. And if I stayed in town I knew perfectly well I

should be at Trewint before the month was out, endeavoring, no doubt feebly, to preserve order at rowdy meetings, and making speeches on matters that interested me not the least.

Then it was borne on me that if I was to be carted off to Trewint forthwith as a shining exemplar of the family greatness, I must deal at once with Mabel's imbroglio. However, even if I had to make haste, there was still time for a "hundred up." I returned to my game and played abominably.

CHAPTER IV

IN OPEN CONFLICT

IT is no good shirking an unpleasant task, unless it can be shirked altogether. And as it was clearly incumbent upon me to take some steps on Mabel's behalf, no object could be served by delay. So, late in the afternoon of the next day I hailed a cab and told the man to drive to the Albany.

I had not formulated in my mind any plan of campaign, but what I wanted to achieve was clear enough. I wanted to prevent Trefusis from scattering about copies of my sister-in-law's letters, and I also wanted to get out of his hands the originals. The only course that presented itself to my mind was to call on Trefusis and ask him to hand them over. I was hardly sanguine enough to expect that he would do so, but, in any case, he would have to do or say something; and on his act or word, whatever it might be, must depend my future action.

On reaching the Albany I dismissed the cab, and

made my way slowly to Trefusis' chambers. Having pressed the electrical bell and heard the answering "trill," I felt that the plunge was taken, and that there was nothing else to do but await developments.

After a short interval the door was opened by a man-servant.

"Is Mr. Trefusis in?"

"No, sir."

"When will he be back?"

"I expect him every moment, sir."

"I'll wait."

The man held the door wide for me to enter, and I crossed the threshold. There was a pleased smile of recognition on his face, and so much cordiality in his manner that I fixed my eye-glass and scrutinized him carefully.

"Think I've seen you before," I observed.

"Oh, yes, sir; certainly, sir." The fellow positively beamed.

"Where?"

"I come from Trewint, sir. I hope Sir Gerald and her ladyship are quite well?"

"Oh, yes." I looked at him again. "Why, bless me!" I exclaimed, with sudden recognition, "you're surely old Tarling's son?"

"Yes, Master Fred." His smile was full drawn.

"And how is your father?"

"Dead, sir; these two years."

"Oh, oh, yes, of course. I remember how sorry I was to hear of it. Let me see, weren't you a great cricketer?"

His smile, which had contracted at the mention of his father, expanded again.

"Not so good as you was, Master Fred."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"I don't know whether you remember the last time we played together for the town, Master Fred, about three years ago?"

"Why, of course." I am afraid the details had rather escaped me, but they were evidently fresh in young Tarling's memory.

"You and me," he went on, simply bubbling over with delight at the recollection, "had forty-six to knock up to win the match, and we did it!"

"Why, so we did," I echoed.

"In fifty-seven minutes!"

"Dear me, that was rather——"

"I was last in, and you says to me, 'Play cautious, and perhaps we can do it!' And I played like a stone wall, while you banged the ball about."

"Yes, and so we managed it between us."

"We did that, Master Fred."

He had ushered me into a sitting room. I sat

down on a chair, and looked at him thoughtfully. He was still little more than a lad, with a fresh, country face, and with a countryman's muscular frame. It occurred to me suddenly that a friend in the enemy's camp would be a useful ally. But the thought was a distasteful one. A gentleman, according to the current code of honor, may do many disgraceful things, but he is hardly entitled to utilize another man's servant as a spy upon his master. If I did not put the idea entirely away, as no doubt I should have done, I relegated it to the back of my mind for further consideration.

"It is a curious coincidence," I said meditatively, "that you should be in Mr. Trefusis' service."

The young fellow's face clouded. "I have only been here since Mr. Trefusis came back from Australia, and——"

I saw he was going to tell me of some of his troubles with his master, and I tried to stop him.

"Is this your first place?" I asked.

"Oh, no, sir," he answered eagerly. "I was for a year with Lord Willingborough as under footman."

"Well, Tarling," I said, "I hope you will get on well. I am pleased to see you again." I glanced at my watch. "I don't think I'll wait any longer."

"I hope, sir, you won't think it a liberty," he

began, with some embarrassment, "but I am not very comfortable here, and if you was to hear of anything——"

"I'll bear you in mind." I got up rather abruptly. The temptation to use the man was becoming irresistible. He was a decent young fellow, and a discreet reference to the facts, coupled perhaps with an offer of employment, would cause him to espouse my cause with enthusiasm. What a blessing to get hold of the letters without trouble or anxiety! Yet—yet—I stood and looked at him doubtfully.

"You don't get on well with Mr. Trefusis?" I said, at length.

"I don't like him," he blurted out, "or his ways. There are lots of funny things go on——"

"Stop, stop!" I cried, thoroughly ashamed. What "shocking form" to go to a man's rooms and listen to the tittle-tattle of his valet! After all, even though I was dealing with a man whom I disliked and distrusted, there was surely meanness of which I must not be guilty.

I was going towards the door when I heard the sound of a key in the lock. "I think I hear Mr. Trefusis," I said, and returned to my seat. Tarling left the room, and in a few minutes Trefusis came in breezy, buoyant, and full of regrets.

"So awfully sorry, my dear chap! If I had only known you intended to call! It's very kind of you to come. Why, I haven't seen you for years."

"Not for some little time," I responded stiffly.

"You know," he went on, with a note of regret in his voice, "how in London one drifts away from one's friends. We seem to have got into different sets." He tossed his gloves on the table, and sat down on the arm of a chair, and looked at me with eyes in which I could trace no shadow of embarrassment. He seemed to be possessed of a single-hearted desire to make me feel at ease. His dark, handsome face expressed nothing but pleasure; his manner was that of a frank, unspoiled boy in the presence of a comrade.

"No," I said slowly, "since we left Oxford we have not often met. Perhaps we have not much in common."

He made an easy, deprecating movement.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "It is difficult to explain why we have seen so little of each other. It just happened." He smiled his ready, happy, good-natured smile. "Anyhow, it's good of you to look me up. Look here, won't you have something? Whisky, tea, anything?"

"No, thanks. In fact, you make me ashamed

to say that my call is hardly a social one. I came on a small matter of business."

"Business?" His face assumed an expression of courteous interest. "I wonder what 'business' we can have together. Somehow the term doesn't seem applicable in connection with you."

"Why?"

"Oh, I hardly know, except that I thought you regarded all business as far too unpleasant to concern yourself with."

"I am afraid this particular business is unpleasant, but, nevertheless, I must concern myself with it."

"Strange, indeed." His curiosity did not seem excited; he produced his cigarette case and offered it to me. I declined; he selected a cigarette and lit it.

"Sometimes," I said, "one is obliged to intervene in matters that do not directly concern one's self. What I have come to see you about is a case in point. I can hardly imagine myself troubling you on my own account."

"No trouble, I assure you. Quite charmed to be of any service."

I wanted to tell this man that I considered he was a blackguard, but I found it very difficult.

"If I may take that as a promise, I need not

detain you more than five minutes," I said. "You hold some letters written by my sister-in-law, Lady Trewint. I want them, please."

His face assumed an expression of concern. "My dear fellow——" he began.

"There are also some printed copies of these letters in your possession," I went on. "These, too, I want."

"Printed copies!" he ejaculated. "Whatever can you mean?"

"Pray do not let us waste time. I am dining out this evening, and have to get back to my chambers to dress."

"I, too, am dining out, and I also have to dress. But I am afraid I must trouble you for some explanation of this very curious demand."

I tapped with my knuckles on the table. "I want the letters written to you by my sister-in-law."

"So you said just now."

"And the prints of these letters."

"You repeat yourself again."

"Do you decline to give them up?"

He rose from the elbow of the armchair on which he had been sitting, and, sauntering to the fireplace, knocked off the ash of his cigarettte meditatively. Then he turned:

"Trewint," he said, "I do not want to take

offense unnecessarily, but there is a peremptoriness about your request which I rather resent. At the same time I understand that you are here as the representative of a lady, for whom—it is useless to deny it—I have a very warm feeling. That in itself is sufficient to make me overlook what otherwise I might be inclined to take in bad part. But I cannot understand what you mean when you talk about printed copies. Tell me what you mean?"

"What I mean," I said steadily, "is that the letters my sister-in-law wrote to you have been printed. A copy of the print was sent to her with the veiled threat to send copies to her husband and her friends."

A shocked exclamation came from Trefusis. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed.

"You may take it as true," I responded coldly. My belief in his guilt was so great that if an angel had descended from heaven to assure me that I was mistaken, I should have discredited the celestial messenger.

"And you think — you actually think — that I——"

"Yes, I do."

"And Mabel—does Mabel——" His voice broke. "I am sure Mabel does not think that I——"

"Yes, she does."

"It is utterly monstrous; wickedly, shamefully untrue! Am I the man to do an act of that kind?"

"Well, candidly," I replied, "I rather think you are."

He turned on me, his eyes ablaze with anger. "How dare you come here—to my own rooms—and insult me?" His hand went towards the bell.

"Why," said I, "do you not hand me the letters?"

He drew his hand back from the bell. "Because—of course, you will not believe me—I have not got them."

"Where are they, then?"

"I have lost them." Anguish seemed to choke his utterance. He turned and leant against the mantelpiece, his face resting on his arms.

I was silent for a moment, and then incredulity repossessed me.

"Surely, that is pretty thin," I observed.

My words seemed to sting him. He drew himself up and faced me. "Thin or not thin, it is the truth."

"Where did you lose them?"

"They were lost on my return journey from Australia. All her letters I carried about with me

everywhere. I—loved her." His head dropped on his breast; his attitude was that of a broken-hearted man. "I dare say you know we were engaged to be married, and then—and then she broke off our engagement by letter. I hastened back to find her—already married." He covered his face with his hands.

It was very unpleasant. Even an actor can move by the semblance of suffering. I declined to allow myself to believe that he was not acting, yet a little imp of doubt was beginning to torment me.

"You lost them, you say?" I tried to put incredulity into my voice.

"Yes, I lost them. They were in my dressing-bag. It was stolen."

"Indeed?"

"Oh," he cried, with a sudden access of passion, "of course you don't believe me. I do not care whether you believe me or not. But I do care that Mabel should think that I could injure her! I would die for her, even to-day, even at this moment, if I could!" He flung out his arms. "And it hurts—my God, it hurts—that she should think that I could act so shamefully."

"What possible object could anyone but yourself have in printing these letters?" I asked weakly.

"What object could I have?" he cried, raising his head for a moment.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Revenge, I suppose."

"Revenge! Revenge on Mabel—whom I love!" He let his face drop again into his hands. For some moments we were both silent.

"Of course," I said, speaking with great deliberation, "if, by any chance, I have done you an injustice, I shall do my utmost to repair the injury."

"I care nothing for what you have said or done," he answered bitterly, "but I shall not rest until I have proved to Mabel that I am not the cur she thinks me. By Heaven! if I could discover the man who had been trying to blackmail her——"

"Blackmail?" I said quickly. "That is how you explain it?"

He regarded me with weary eyes. "It is obvious," he said, "that the letters have fallen into the hands of some blackguard, who, seeing they were love-letters addressed to a man who is not her husband, is endeavoring to make money out of them. There is no great mystery about it."

I looked at him steadily, but he did not flinch. I sighed, and turned away.

"I wish to heaven I could tell whether you are lying or not. But I confess I cannot."

"You may insult me as much as you like to-day. I am too much upset to resist. But I swear that if any other man ever speaks to me as you have spoken, I will——" He did not finish his sentence, but sank dejectedly into an armchair.

I turned toward him half compassionately.

"What shall I say to you, Trefusis, if I have made a mistake?"

The softened tone in my voice seemed to appeal to him, for he looked up wistfully.

"Do you believe me innocent?"

I hesitated.

"You do not?" he said sadly. "And neither will Mabel. It is hard, hard."

My heart was touched; I was about to put all my doubts aside and assure him I was conscious of having deeply wronged him, when my eyes fell on a safe that stood in the corner of the room.

"Do you wish to convince me of your innocence?" I asked, for a sudden thought had flashed across my mind.

"I will do anything in my power to do so," he replied earnestly.

"Then," said I, "lend me your keys; and let me open that safe."

The suggestion took him by surprise, and for the first time in the course of our interview there was something in his manner that struck me as inconsistent with his protestations. The dejected expression vanished from his face, and his forehead was furrowed with a frown. For some moments he did not speak.

"I have not the keys," he replied at length. "They are in my strong room at the Safe Deposit Company's."

Inherently, this did not sound very probable. Like many men, he wore a keychain, as I could see.

"Lend me your bunch of keys, and let me test the truth of that assertion."

He sprang to his feet. "Confound you," he cried, "you go a step too far. How many times am I to be told I am a liar in my own room?"

"You desired to convince me that you were not a liar. Here is the test. Lend me your keys."

"I will not," he cried. "Leave my room. I have stood your impertience long enough."

"Give me," I said, "my sister-in-law's letters, which are in that safe."

"Leave my chambers this instant!"

"I want those letters first."

He controlled himself suddenly. "I do not wish to put you to any unnecessary indignity, Tre-

wint, but, unless you leave these rooms, I shall tell my servant to turn you out."

My blood was getting up. "You must give me these letters; for, by Heaven! I will not leave till I have them."

He crossed to the bell, and I clinched my fists and waited. He pressed the knob, and I could hear the "trill" in a remote part of the chambers. His face was pale, but his composure had returned as suddenly as mine had left me.

"Surely we are not to indulge in a vulgar *fracas?*" he said. "What possible good can it do you to be thrown out by brute force?"

"Give me those letters," I answered stubbornly, "and I'll go quietly enough."

"Aren't you behaving rather stupidly?" There was a note of indulgent contempt in his voice. "You come to ask me for certain documents. I tell you with sincere regret that they have been stolen from me. You beg leave to ransack my private safe with the benevolent intention of proving me a liar. Not unnaturally I decline to give way to your folly. You then refuse to leave my rooms and make a scene, having to be pitched out by my servant. And the steps are stone," he added.

"I am not pitched out yet," I replied grimly.

But I confess that it was dawning on me that I was making a fool of myself. Whether the letters were in the safe or not, I was not in the least increasing my chance of getting them. Why should I fight with a servant? And yet my pride—so foolish is pride—made it difficult for me to give way.

At that moment the door opened and Tarling entered. I had entirely forgotten my conversation with him, but as soon as I saw his face I remembered it. It was not unlikely he would decline to engage in a scuffling match with me.

"Tarling," Trefusis ordered, "show Mr. Trewint the door."

"Tarling," said I, "your master is a scoundrel."

Tarling stood at the door with his mouth slightly open.

"Show Mr. Trewint out," Trefusis continued in an even voice, "or if he will not go, I must ask you to put him out. But do not use unnecessary violence." He took out his cigarette case, and fingered another cigarette.

"Tarling," said I, "listen to me. A lady who is a relation of mine wrote your master some letters. He thinks——"

"Are you seriously proposing to make my servant a confidant?" asked Trefusis, with amused wonder in his voice.

I took no notice of his interruption. "He thinks the letters are compromising, and because the lady got tired of him and married someone else, he is threatening to show her letters to her husband. He has even had them printed to send to her friends. Is not that the act of a blackguard?"

Tarling stood motionless, save that his mouth opened wider.

"I fear you are not interesting my man," observed Trefusis sarcastically. "Tarling, turn this fool out."

"Tarling," I began for the third time, "the lady has asked me to help her. The letters are in that safe. The keys are in your master's pockets. Help me to get them."

Trefusis laughed. "Really, you have the most astounding insolence! Tarling, kick this fellow out of my room; or, if you are afraid, go and fetch a policeman." He glanced at the clock. "Hurry up, man, or I shall be late for dinner."

Tarling smiled feebly and scratched his head. Then his mouth shut and he advanced into the room. Trefusis had turned away indifferently and was lighting his cigarette. My eye caught Tarling's, and I saw from the answering gleam that he had decided to throw in his lot with me.

"Now then, Tarling——" began Trefusis, hardly deigning to look around. The next moment the arms of his servant were round him with a grip of iron.

"Now, Master Fred, you can get at his keys," said Tarling.

"Can you hold him all right?" I cried, hastening towards him.

"'Master Fred,'" echoed Trefusis. "So you know him, do you? Damn you, Trewint, have you been nobbling my servant?"

"Have you got them?" asked Tarling.

"Yes, yes." I had hauled the keys by their chain from Trefusis' pocket, and had detached the bunch. I crossed to the safe and began testing the various keys in the lock. Trefusis had given over struggling, for Tarling had twisted his arms behind him in such a way that any movement meant agony. His face was livid, and there was a vindictive look in his eyes. When I glanced in his direction, I could see Tarling's face, like a harvest moon, over his shoulder.

Undoubtedly I was feeling rather excited. My fingers trembled as I tried the keys in turn. At length I found one that turned the lock.

"Please remember," cried Trefusis, "that you are committing a criminal act. You and your con-

federate are rendering yourselves liable to penal servitude."

"You alarm me," I replied with indifference. I had opened the door of the safe and was peering in vaguely at the books and papers it contained. "By the way, Tarling, did a parcel come from a printer's a week or so ago?"

Tarling thought. "I remember a parcel coming from Glasgow, because I had to pay on it."

"Can you see it here?"

Tarling urged his master across the room.

"That looks like it on the left," he said.

I hauled out the packet indicated. It was tied up roughly with a string. I placed it on the table and proceeded to unfasten a knot.

"If you open that parcel I will prosecute you," cried Trefusis rather wildly.

I took no notice. The brown paper fell aside and disclosed about fifty replicas of the booklet I had seen in Mabel's hands.

I turned to Trefusis. "Oh, you liar!" His face was white and drawn, and even at the moment I felt a vague stirring of compassion. He uttered not a word.

"Is that all you want?" asked Tarling.

"Where are the originals?"

"What's that there amongst the little books?" asked Tarling, jerking his chin towards a bulky envelope. I hastily tore it open.

"Right," said I; "here they are, and the receipted bill for the printing. That may be useful." I slipped the packet into my pocket and roughly tied up the bigger parcel. "That's all I want. The next thing is to clear out."

"*I* can't stay here, sir, after all this," observed Tarling.

"No, of course you can't. You must come along with me. And I think you can let go Mr. Trefusis' arms. I've got what I want, and I certainly shan't let go of it."

Tarling relinquished his hold, and Trefusis, after standing for a moment regarding us with a scowl of hate, flung himself into a chair.

"If you've got what you want," he said sullenly, "go away. But you will certainly hear from me."

"Come along, Tarling." I tucked the parcel comfortably under my arm and put on my hat. Suddenly the bell rang.

"Damn!" I exclaimed. Trefusis started to attention, and then made a sudden dash for the door.

"Stop him!" I shouted. Tarling made a long

reach, collared him, and flung him back upon the sofa.

The bell rang again.

"Help!" shouted Trefusis. "Help! help!"

"Come," said I to Tarling, "we must get out of this. Is there any other way out save through the front door?"

"No, sir," answered Tarling. "Shall I answer the door and say Mr. Trefusis is not at home?"

"Good idea! No, hang it, the man outside must have heard Trefusis shouting. We had better go straight out and trust our luck."

"Yes, sir," said Tarling.

"And you had better lock Mr. Trefusis in this room, and bring the key away with you."

"Yes, sir."

"Good-by, Trefusis," I said. We went out, and Trefusis, dashing forward, tried to force his way past us, but a violent push from Tarling sent him reeling back into the room. Tarling locked the door, and then went for his hat. The bell continued to ring, and, to add to the noise, Trefusis commenced to batter at the panels of the door with his fists, shouting loudly for help.

"Are you ready?" said I to Tarling when he had returned.

"Yes, sir."

"Open the door, then."

He flung it open. A young man in evening dress stood outside, evidently in a state of alarm.

"What—what is the meaning of this?" he quavered.

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of—of that shouting?"

"Oh, that!" I answered. "It is merely Mr. Trefusis. Pray walk in. He will be most pleased to see you."

But he hesitated. "I do not understand——" he began.

"He will explain," I replied in a friendly tone. "The story will amuse you very much."

"But really," he stammered, "I hear Mr. Trefusis calling out 'Thieves!'"

"If you will accompany me," I said, "I will tell you the details of this amusing incident as we walk along. I am sure it will interest you. But I cannot stay, for I am in a great hurry. Or perhaps you would prefer to go inside and let Mr. Trefusis tell you in his own words."

"I—I—must insist on a proper explanation."

I shook my head smilingly. "Then you must get it from Mr. Trefusis, for I really can't stop." And I commenced to descend the stairs, Tarling following me. The battering at the door and the

shouts for assistance increased in vehemence. The young man looked with hesitation at us disappearing from his view, and then he regarded dubiously the open door of the flat. So we left him, evidently greatly at a loss as to the course to be pursued.

"If that young man makes up his mind to shout to the porter to stop us before we get out of the place, we shall be awkwardly situated," I observed.

"Yes, sir."

"But if we can get into a cab while he is fluctuating, I am really not alarmed about the future."

"No, sir."

"At the same time, to hurry will only attract attention."

"Yes, sir."

"It is lucky, is it not, Tarling, that that young man is of the flutter-brained class?"

"Yes, sir."

By this time we had reached the ground floor, and we walked quietly out into the Burlington Gardens.

"Call a cab," I said to Tarling, and he did so. We got in, and told the cabman to drive to my chambers.

"After all, there was no need for hurry," said I, drawing, at the same time, a breath of relief. I leant back in the cab with a feeling of complacency.

"The truth is, Tarling, the odds are in favor of a man who can keep his head."

"Yes, sir."

"If we had rushed down the staircase, red-faced and wild-eyed, the porter would have stopped us. As it is, he did not raise his head from his newspaper as we passed."

"No, sir."

I glanced at a clock in Bond Street. "By Jove, half-past seven, and I am due at my brother's at eight. I shall have to hurry. Tarling, I take you into my employment. At present an elderly widow lady who has seen better days gives me my breakfast and cleans out my rooms. At any rate, she says she does. But there is no reason why I should not have a valet. You would like to enter my service, wouldn't you, Tarling?"

"Oh, yes, sir." He beamed at the suggestion.

The cab stopped, and I jumped out. Telling the cabman to wait, I ran upstairs to my rooms and hastily dressed. In less than a quarter of an hour I was ready to start.

I locked up the parcel of ribbon-bedecked booklets, and put the letters into my pocket; and then I jumped into my cab, and, feeling at peace with all mankind, arrived, with a few minutes in hand, at my brother's house.

CHAPTER V

MOLLY

WHEN I entered the drawing room I found Mabel and her mother alone. "I was afraid I was going to be late," I said, as I shook hands. "Where's everybody?"

"Gerald has gone down to the wine-cellar," said Mabel. "He trusts no one with the keys, not even me. I suppose he thinks I am still too recent. And the Telbys haven't turned up yet."

"How are you?" asked Mrs. Fielders, nodding affably from the sofa. "Mabel looks all right, doesn't she? I suppose you didn't see her yesterday when you called?"

"Oh, yes, I did," I answered.

"Fred is quite the cause of my return to health," observed Mabel. "He is so comforting." Then she looked toward me, and her eyes framed a mute interrogation. I nodded gently in response.

"Oh, Fred," she cried suddenly, "did I ever show you the lovely vases the tenantry at Trewint gave us?" She led the way into the back drawing room, and I followed.

"What news?" she asked in a whisper.

"I have your letters. Here they are."

She seized them and her eyes sparkled.

"Thank you, Fred, so much; so very much. Oh, Fred, you are a dear!"

At that moment we heard Gerald's voice, and she thrust the letters into her pocket. We went back again into the other room.

"Well, Fred, how are you?" asked my brother rather pre-occupiedly.

"All right, thanks."

"I can't understand why those Telbys don't come. It is exceedingly bad form to be late."

"They are only five minutes behind time, dear," said his wife soothingly.

"Five minutes late is five minutes late," her husband responded oracularly. Then he turned to me. "By the way, Fred, I must particularly beg you not to annoy Mr. Telby."

"Why, certainly not," said I, rather astonished. "Why should I?"

"He is a very serious-minded man. Pray try and check your flippant nonsense. It annoys me, but it will disgust him."

I shrugged my shoulders. Mrs. Fielders gave a little cry of protest.

"Oh, my dear Gerald, we shall all be bored

to death. I was relying on Fred to entertain us."

"Fred does not entertain me," returned my brother severely. "I confess nothing distresses me so much as having to listen to his perverted views on things in general. They may pass as witty with foolish people——"

"Like me," interposed Mrs. Fielders. "Fred, let us comfort each other. Your brother has broken both our heads."

Gerald went on. "Mr. Telby is a man with matured convictions. He comes of a Nonconformist family who were, without exception, stanch Radicals. He retains his religious views, but after a careful study of political questions, he has become a strong upholder of Conservative opinions. This does him every credit."

"A Dissenter by birth, and a Conservative by conviction!" exclaimed Mrs. Fielders. "Everything points to a pleasant evening."

"Didn't somebody say his daughter was coming?" I asked idly. "What is she like?"

Mabel broke in. "Oh, Fred, you know the Telbys are enormously wealthy. It really would be a good thing if you got to like the girl. She is very handsome, and would make a splendid wife."

"Not having any brains," put in Mrs. Fielders.

"My dear boy, don't marry a clever woman. My husband did, and always regretted it."

"I didn't know your husband married twice," said Gerald. He was fidgeting about the room, continually glancing at his watch. "But it's no good advising Fred to adopt a sensible course. It only incites him to take the opposite way. Besides, I do not believe Mr. Telby would allow his daughter to marry anyone save a man of intellect and character."

"I must see the lady before I decide definitely," I replied lightly, to turn the conversation. My broher was certainly in his least amiable mood.

"And she will have to see you, which is another impediment. It is no good, Mabel, you had better give up your scheme."

"Why, Gerald," she cried, "it was you who made the suggestion originally."

"Perhaps I did," he snapped, "but I have a conscience, after all. The girl has never injured me. Fifteen minutes! Intolerable, utterly intolerable!"

Luckily, at that moment Mr. Telby and his daughter were announced. He bustled in, a short, thick-set man, with a strong chin that seemed to betoken tremendous determination, and a deep bass voice, which vibrated through the room like a

gong. Behind him came his daughter; and when my eyes fell on her face I had difficulty in withdrawing them. She was tall and carried herself well. Her face was absolutely perfect in its queenly beauty. For the moment I had the sensation of repressing a tendency to gasp.

"I am sorry I am so late," said Mr. Telby, in his deep voice, "but I waited for my son. It was arranged he should call for us at the hotel." He glanced around the room. "Has he not arrived?"

"No," said Mabel pleasantly, as she shook hands with the newcomers. "He hasn't come yet. But you are not a bit late. Let me introduce you to my mother; and this is Mr. Fred Trewint."

Mr. Telby shook hands, with eyes far from mine. "It is strange, isn't it? Molly, where can Gilbert be?"

Her name was Molly! I touched the hand she extended, and a thrill ran through me. But what a stupid name for so regal a creature!

"Oh," she replied, "I dare say he has forgotten all about his engagement. You know, papa, he didn't want to come."

Mrs. Fielders' eyes went up, and Mabel, for a single moment, showed surprise. Mr. Telby coughed and frowned, but the beautiful girl was

quite unconscious that she had said anything out of place.

Mabel intervened with her bright smile.

"We won't wait, Mr. Telby. I dare say your son will forgive us. Fred, will you take down Miss Telby?" And we descended to the dining room.

"I can't imagine where Gilbert is," I heard the father booming. "He is usually so punctual. I can place the utmost reliance on his promises."

"Are you anxious about your brother, Miss Telby?" I asked, as we took our seats.

"Anxious? Why should I be anxious?" She turned her wonderful eyes full on me. "What could have happened to him?"

"Perhaps," said I lightly, and solely to say something, "he has been run over by a steam-roller."

It was an exceedingly stupid remark, but surely anyone might be expected to see it was not intended to be taken seriously. The girl looked at me in a startled way, and then she leant in her father's direction.

"Papa," she said in her rich, full voice, that sounded like a distant echo of her father's, "Mr. Trewint is afraid Gilbert has been run over by a steam-roller!"

There was a dead silence. And then Mabel laughed rather forcedly.

"Oh, you mustn't take any notice of what Fred says. He is always talking nonsense."

"Miss Telby misunderstood me," I said hastily. The girl was a perfect idiot. Mrs. Fielders was on my other side, and I turned to her for comfort.

"We are going to have a thoroughly amusing evening," she said. "Mr. Telby is already summarizing his election address."

"Not much summary about it, either," I answered.

"His voice makes me wonder if there is a Providence, after all," Mrs. Fielders continued. "Just think how much more tolerable he would be if he spoke in a little, tin-pot whisper."

"Why?"

"Because then one wouldn't have to listen. As it is, I find myself following every word. I am beginning to know his views. It is quite terrible!"

"It is certainly trying," I admitted.

"Why don't you talk to the girl on your left?"

"Frightened," I answered laconically; and yet I found my glance continually straying in her direction. It was impossible to keep my eyes away from her face.

"I shall not be able to last out much longer," said Mrs. Fielders, after an interval, filled only by Mr. Telby's sonorous intonation. "Cannot you cause a distraction? I feel my nerves are getting tense."

I could not help noticing that the state of her nerves did not seem to affect her appetite.

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Scream," she answered. "One loud piercing scream will save me."

"I would do so willingly if I were not destined to take the chair at his metings. If I scream now, how could I abstain from screaming then?"

"True," she observed thoughtfully. "I wonder how the newspapers would report the incident? 'At this moment, the Chairman screamed violently, and was removed. A spare Chairman was brought in, and the speaker proceeded.'"

"Something of the sort," I answered abstractly, gazing in a different direction. Miss Telby's eyes met mine.

"I am getting quite anxious about Gilbert," she said. "You don't really think an accident has happened to him?"

"No, of course I don't," I replied. "I was only trying to be funny. It was foolish of me."

Her eyes opened a little wider and she sighed

gently. "Milly says I have no sense of humor. I often think people are serious when they are not. Humor," she added pathetically, "seems so often to consist of saying what you don't mean."

What a brute I had been to worry this gentle creature!

"My remark wasn't a bit humorous," I replied remorsefully. "It was only silly. But who is Milly?"

Her eyes brightened. "Milly is my younger sister. I am sure you would like her; she is so clever."

"Is she in town with you?"

"Oh, no; she is down at Trewint. You have no idea what an important person she is there. She rushes about all over the country on her bicycle, and looks after people—poor people, I mean. Mr. Vicars often says he would not know what to do without her."

I nodded. "I suppose Mr. Vicars is a parson?"

"He is a minister; the minister of the chapel. Milly teaches in the Sunday school. She has a class of boys, some of them quite big. They simply adore her."

"And don't you teach in the Sunday School?" I asked, with a reproving air.

"Oh, no," she replied. "I did try once, but somehow I couldn't think of anything to say. It was really rather horrible for me, and then the children began to giggle. Children are so clever," she added, sighing.

"Is Milly your only sister?" I asked, continuing the conversation, chiefly, I am afraid, that I might have an excuse for keeping my eyes on her face.

"Yes. I have a brother, as you know; the brother you thought had been run over. He is not very clever; none of us are clever except Milly."

"I am not clever either," I told her confidentially. "At least I am always being told so; and I suppose it must be true."

"Oh, I should think you were clever," she replied. "Aren't you going to help father at the election? He told me you were going to take the chair at his big meetings. You must be clever to be able to do that."

"Anyone can sit in a chair," I replied deprecatingly. "The question is what shall I do when I am standing up."

"I am sure you speak splendidly. Everyone thinks so much of the Trewints. Of course, they are the big people in Trewint. Father was rather

disappointed Sir Gerald couldn't come himself, but I am certain you will do just as well."

"I don't think my brother would like to hear you say that," I said laughingly. "But I suppose you will come to the meetings and sit on the platform?"

"Oh, yes."

"When I get into any difficulty I shall turn to you for help. You must sit quite near."

"Oh, no," she cried affrightedly, "you mustn't depend on me to help you. But I am sure Milly will do so. I will tell her."

When dinner was nearly over, a knock at the front door betokened a new arrival, and shortly afterward a footman ushered a young man into the room, at whose advent there was an immediate outburst of little exclamations.

"Why, Gilbert," said Mr. Telby, his voice drowning every other, "how comes it you are so late?"

"I am very sorry," said the young man as he passed round to shake hands with his hostess, "but I—I couldn't help it."

"It doesn't in the least matter," said Mabel. "We are so glad you have come, after all." She indicated the vacant chair, and he sat down.

The room was lit only by the lamps on the

table, but as he sat down his face was brought into the circle of light, and I wondered vaguely where I had seen him before.

"I was detained by a most extraordinary affair." He seemed very nervous, and I noticed his hand trembled as he unfolded his serviette.

"Not a steam-roller?" asked his sister breathlessly.

"A steam-roller!" He seemed bewildered. "Oh, no. I ran in for a moment to see a friend of mine, before going on to the hotel where, you know, father, I promised to meet you."

"Yes," said Mr. Telby.

"And—and a burglary had just been committed."

"A burglary!" everybody ejaculated, except myself, for I recollected where we had met.

"I went round to Trefusis' chambers——"

"Trefusis!" exclaimed Mabel, her face becoming scarlet.

"That is the name of my friend. He lives in the Albany. Just as I got to his door, the thieves were coming out. One of them had a bundle under his arm."

"And you stopped them?" said his father. He looked round triumphantly, preparing to glory in his son's achievement.

"N—no. You see, I didn't know they were burglars. They didn't look like it. One was Trefusis' servant, whom I had often seen."

"Was he a confederate?" asked my brother.

"Yes. The other looked like a gentleman. Quite young, and rather good-looking. He spoke to me, but he semed so self-possessed and cool that I could hardly believe——"

"Of course not," interposed his father. "How in the world could you know? You can't tell instinctively who is and who is not a thief. And there was nothing to raise your suspicions."

"Of course," said young Telby, rather embarrassedly, "I could hear Trefusis shouting."

"Your friend was in his rooms the while?" queried Gerald.

"Yes. You see, it happened like this. The servant showed a man in, who said he wished to see Trefusis on business. Trefusis spoke to him, and he was insolent. So Trefusis rang for his servant, and told him to turn the fellow out. Instead of doing so, the servant flung his arms round Trefusis, and held him fast while the other pulled Trefusis' keys out of his pocket and opened the safe. They took what they wanted and went away, locking Trefusis up in his room."

I stole a glance at Mabel. Her face was ab-

solutely purple, and her eyes were fixed with a fascinated stare on young Telby. She withdrew them with an effort, and they met mine. We both instantly averted our gaze.

"What a very audacious business!" exclaimed my brother. "It is astonishing that such things can happen in London. Did they take anything of value?"

"Only some papers; some very important papers."

A little choked exclamation came from Mabel.

"You see, I rang the bell outside, and that disturbed them. Trefusis thinks it is very lucky I came at that moment."

"I have no doubt," said Mr. Telby, with a proud note in his voice, "that you were the means of saving him a great deal, possibly his life."

"Oh, I don't know," said the youth modestly. "I rang the bell several times, and I could get no answer. I could hear movements inside, or I suppose I should have gone away. And then the door opened and the two men came out. I could hear Trefusis shouting, and I asked one of the men what was the meaning of it. He answered, very pleasantly, that he couldn't stop to explain, but that Mr. Trefusis would tell me all about it. Then he nodded in quite a friendly way and went

slowly down the stairs. I didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you stop them and demand an explanation?" asked my brother.

"Well you see, they were two and I was only one," replied the young man simply. "And besides, I could hear Trefusis shouting and banging at the door. I thought I ought to go to him first."

"You did quite right," said his father, rather nettled at the suspicion thrown on his son's heroism. "You were quite right to go to your friend's assistance. There might have been a third burglar inside, severely injuring him."

"Well," asked Mrs. Fielders, "what happened next?"

"It took a short time to get Trefusis out. We had to break the lock. And then it took some time for him to explain what had happened."

"I suppose you communicated with the police?"

"Trefusis said he would see to that. He was in a tremendous rage, but he said nothing could be done at the minute, for they must have had lots of time to get away."

"Most extraordinary affair altogether," observed my brother.

"I stayed some time talking to Trefusis, and I am afraid it put my engagement here quite out of

my head. But when I remembered, I hurried here as quickly as I could." He looked apologetically towards Mabel, who tried to smile, but succeeded badly.

"Plucky of you to come on here after such an experience," said Mr. Telby, who evidently regarded his son as worthy of all admiration.

"What was the second fellow like—the one who seemed a gentleman?" asked Gerald.

"Rather tall and slight. He spoke with a drawl. He had rather a pleasant manner, though."

"The description quite suits you, Fred," said Mrs. Fielders in her chaffing way. "I hope you haven't been doing any burgling."

Mabel gave a smothered cry, but Mrs. Fielders' remark and Mabel's exclamation passed unnoticed, for everyone's attention was fixed on the hero of the moment.

"It is a scandalous business," said my brother indignantly. "Our lives are not safe in our own houses. Why, bless me, Miss Telby!"

We all turned to Molly, who was found to be in tears.

"It is nothing," she said, wiping her eyes with her serviette. "I am very foolish, but, oh, if those dreadful men had hurt Gilbert!"

In my eagerness to console her, I forgot the kindly protection of the flower-vase which I had been keeping between Gilbert Telby and myself. I leant forward to whisper consoling words in her ear. Looking up suddenly, I discovered the young man's eyes fixed on me. A spoonful of soup was poised in mid-air. Then the spoon emptied its contents into his lap. His mouth opened, and he gave a kind of shocked exclamation.

"What is the matter, Gilbert?" cried his father. "The affair has been too much for you. You are faint?"

"It is nothing, nothing," murmured the young fellow. His eyes withdrew themselves from mine with an effort.

"Some brandy, please. Let my son have some brandy!" cried the father, quite distracted.

The servants flew to administer remedies.

"The Telby family is quite prostrated," murmured Mrs. Fielders in my ears. "I really don't think much of their nerves. Does Mabel intend to keep us here whilst that young man has his dinner? It will take a long time, if he is to have restoratives administered between every course."

And then Mabel began to talk in a high-pitched voice, punctuated with little bursts of foolish laughter. Mrs. Fielders looked at her anxiously.

"What is the matter with everybody? Now Mabel is going to be hysterical. I really should not have thought it of her."

I looked at Mabel and frowned. She caught my glance, and checked herself in the middle of a sentence. Then her mother looked at her and half rose. I opened the door and the three ladies filed out.

We lit cigars, and I drank some liqueur brandy, while the young man, whose appetite had left him, made a pretense of eating some of the dishes the servants proffered. But he soon gave up the attempt and sat silent, drawing quaint designs with his fingers on the tablecloth, occasionally casting furtive glances in my direction. His father kept pestering him with questions, which he answered almost incoherently. At length the subject began to bore my brother, who broke in with a question about the Trewint election. This served to turn the conversation, and soon Mr. Telby was dilating in his deep voice on the political situation.

At length we joined the ladies. Mabel glanced apprehensively at her husband's face as he entered the room. I think she feared that young Telby had accused me of being *particeps criminis*, and that I had divulged the whole story. She cheered up a little when she found that peace still reigned serene.

It was not long before Mr. Telby, who must have noticed the pale face and constrained manner of his son, prepared to take his departure.

"Your brother will be down at Trewint early next week, will he not?" he asked Gerald.

"Yes, certainly," my brother responded.

"Of course he will stay with us during the election."

"That is very kind of you. I am sure he will be delighted. Of course, Trewint Hall would be lonely——"

"Then we will take that as settled."

"Thank you, very much."

I was not consulted. Yet, as his chairman, it did seem to me he should show me more deference. However, it would be pleasant to be able to look at Molly.

When they had gone I turned to Mabel, who happened to be alone.

"I expect young Telby will give his father the tip to lock up the spoons while I am staying at their place."

She turned reproachful eyes on me.

"You make a jest of everything," she said. "I only hope it may not prove more than a joke. Oh, Fred, how could you!"

CHAPTER VI

AN ANGRY FATHER

LYING in a state of drowsy semi-consciousness, the next morning, I was awakened by Tarling entering my bedroom. For some moments, I wondered who he was and what he wanted. Gradually I remembered the events of the previous day, and with the recollection there came over me a feeling of serene self-complacency.

"Hot or cold bath, sir?"

"Cold."

When a naturally indolent man overcomes his reluctance to exertion, and when his unusual activity is crowned with complete success, he feels himself a mighty hero. There is nothing more exhilarating than the sense of achievement, and naturally the feeling is more intense when the individual is unaccustomed to essay. I lay in bed with a smile on my face. Yesterday, I had a horrid task before me, which I saw little prospect of carrying through. To-day my anxieties were ended. I had wrested Mabel's letters from her

enemy's grasp. She was happy and safe, and I was freed from an unpleasant business.

Yes, but was I? Trefusis was an ugly customer. The keynote of his character was maliciousness, united to an ingenuity which seemed hardly that of a sane man. Would he let me alone? Perhaps at this very moment he, too, was lying on his back in bed, watching, like myself, the gyrations of three sportive flies on a white ceiling, and elaborating some subtle, heart-racking form of revenge, designed to bend and ultimately to break my proud spirit. Let him do his worst! Had I not proved his match?

Yes, but——. I fell into a train of uneasy musings. It is all very well to feel superior to another man, but when the day before you have robbed him with violence, may there not be methods whereby he may make you acutely uncomfortable? Suppose, for instance, he put the matter into the hands of the police? Suppose he went to Bow Street and obtained a warrant for my arrest on a charge of felony? I saw my brother driving up in a cab to bail me out. I could even hear him explaining to the inspector that I must not be considered responsible for my strange behavior. What course should I take under these circumstances? Should I——

"Your bath is ready, sir."

"Yes, yes."

Should I tell the whole truth, explain the exact circumstances? A British jury would hardly convict when they heard my story. But then there was poor Mabel to consider. How would the typical hero of romance act under these trying circumstances? Would he refuse to speak? I saw myself standing in the dock, with folded arms and a haggard, worn face. I even began to prepare pathetic little speeches. "I may not speak! Do not press me! But before Heaven, I am innocent!" The judge on the bench would implore me to clear myself; my counsel would burst into bitter tears; the orchestra would sound a deep, sad note; the limelight would play about my solitary, tragic figure; and then the judge would assume his black cap; and then—and then, just in the nick of time, Mabel would rush on the scene. "He is innocent! I swear it!" And I should be immediately released amidst plaudits.

"It is ten o'clock, sir."

I must have fallen asleep. "Yes, yes; I am getting up." I put one leg out of bed. Certainly, if Trefusis wanted to cause mischief, he could do so by employing the police. The whole story would then have to be made public, for, once fully

awake, the desire to play an heroic part vanished. But, in that case, Trefusis' dirty tricks would be exposed to public criticism and condemnation. Would he be prepared to face the social disgrace? No, I knew he would not. He attached far too great a value to his position in society. On consideration, I was convinced he would take no steps likely to lead to a public exposure.

I was safe enough from a criminal charge. Had I any "weak spot" on which he could fasten? I do not pretend to be better than my fellows, but the world regards leniently the peccadilloes of the average man. On the whole, I was satisfied my armor of defense was without any serious flaw.

But what about that young ass, Gilbert Telby? It was more than probable that he would tell his father and sister that he recognized me as one of the "burglars" he had confronted the night before. And, oh, what would Molly think? How shocked she would be! And then Mabel had decided I was to marry her! What well-conducted girl would marry a criminal? It was really very annoying and upsetting. However, that was no reason why I should lie in bed any longer.

In my bath, another thought struck me. Suppose Mr. Telby, overwhelmed by his son's disclos-

ures, rushed around to see my brother to tell him the awful story of my crime? How upset Mabel would be! And she would probably upbraid me bitterly for mismanaging the affair. I sponged my head with cold water, conveniently at hand, and sat and pondered.

The best course, I decided, was to call on Mr. Telby and find out what his attitude was towards me. If Gilbert had "blabbed," and I gathered Mr. Telby knew the worst, I would confide in him to a limited extent under the seal of secrecy. If he knew nothing, I would get hold of his son, and find some way to make him keep his own counsel. Having come to this conclusion, I dressed leisurely and ate a hearty, if belated, breakfast.

Mr. Telby was, as I knew, staying at the Hotel Cecil. I made my way there and sent up my name. After a considerable interval I was asked to step upstairs, and was finally ushered into Mr. Telby's presence. As soon as I saw his face I knew that Gilbert had told him everything. I suppose it is disconcerting to find your chairman is a polite burglar. At the side of the red-faced father was his pale-faced son, quivering all over with suppressed excitement.

"I have called," I said smoothly, to break the awkward silence, "to talk over our plan of cam-

paign. There are so many things on which I had no opportunity of speaking to you last night."

"Quite so," boomed Mr. Telby. He looked uneasily at his son. "I am sure I should be delighted, but—" he glanced at his watch, "as a matter of fact——"

"The time is not convenient?" I interposed. "Some other time, then. The matter is not pressing."

He hummed and hesitated, commencing disjointed sentences and then breaking off. I understood the predicament he was in. As an honest and respectable man he did not care to associate himself with a person of burglarious tendencies. On the other hand, the Trewint influence would be a potent factor at the coming election, and he was not altogether prepared to sacrifice it. He was facing the problem which has troubled good men from the beginning—how far one is justified in communing with the mammon of unrighteousness for the sake of ulterior good. I had it in my heart to pity him. At any rate, I would put an end to his suspense by introducing the subject. I turned to Gilbert.

"I hope you are none the worse for your experiences of yesterday?"

They both gasped at my boldness. The young man receded a step.

"You allude," replied his father, choking, "to the audacious robbery at which my son surprised the—the participators?"

I nodded pleasantly.

"My son is none the worse—none the worse, at all, thank you."

"Have you any news?"

"I am not sure." He straightened himself. "I am expecting every moment a call from my son's friend, Mr. Trefusis. He has been good enough to promise to call at my request, as I am anxious to obtain certain details from his own lips."

"Oh, indeed." I smiled rather forcedly. It was tiresome that Trefusis should be calling just at that time. But should I go, or should I stay? Their eyes were on me, and I felt they expected me to make a bolt for the door.

"I expect him every moment," repeated Mr. Telby. I think he wished to give me a chance to escape. Perhaps he wanted to avoid a scandal in his rooms. To have your prospective chairman arrested in your own apartments is an awkward commencement of a contested election.

"I shall be glad to see him," I replied, with

assumed heartiness. "He is an old acquaintance of mine. We were at Oxford together."

"You—you know him?" asked Mr. Telby in great surprise.

"Oh, yes; very well."

Mr. Telby's mouth opened, and he looked at his son, who sat down rather suddenly on a plush-covered chair.

"Then, in that case—surely—I cannot understand——" He stopped dead.

"You are evidently perturbed about something?" I said. "I wonder if I can help you?"

He pointed his finger at his son. "The fact is—he——"

"I am quite sure!" burst in the young man. "And Trefusis will corroborate it."

"Corroborate what?" I asked.

"Silence, Gilbert," boomed his father. "Will you insult my friend—if I may call you so, Mr. Trewint?—in my rooms?"

"I am sure Gilbert doesn't want to insult me," I interposed.

"As sure as I sit here——" began Gilbert.

"Be quiet!" cried Mr. Telby.

"It is all very fine——" said the young man sullenly, but his father interrupted him hastily.

"If Mr. Trewint knows Mr. Trefusis, it is evi-

dent you have made a stupid mistake. You told me yourself that Trefusis had never seen the man before."

"I am certain I am not making a mistake," rejoined Gilbert.

Mr. Gilbert turned to me. "Pray forgive the silly lad," he said effusively. "He has been misled by some trifling likeness, and actually avers—the very thought makes me laugh!—that you were—really, I cannot put his nonsense into words."

The "silly lad" was exceedingly red in the face. He kicked viciously the leg of a chair.

"I wish," he exclaimed, "that Trefusis were here."

As if in response to his desire, the door opened and a servant entered to say that Mr. Trefusis was waiting below. Now it was my turn to feel rather uncomfortable. I buttoned my coat and drew a long breath.

"I am afraid," I remarked, "I don't wholly understand what is disturbing you, but, as you have another visitor, perhaps I oughtn't to detain you. If you will allow me, I will call later."

"What did I say?" shouted Gilbert triumphantly; "I knew he would not face Trefusis."

I bit my lip. "Really, Mr. Telby, your son

has quaint manners. I have no objection to face Mr. Trefusis—a hundred Mr. Trefusis's for that matter. Why cannot he be shown up?"

"Why, certainly," said Mr. Telby, fussy and unhappy. "Why not, indeed? A very sensible suggestion, and one that does you great credit. Personally, I don't regard seriously Gilbert's ridiculous suspicions. The very thought is absurd. And if he has been making a mistake, I shall most certainly reduce his allowance."

"Please remember," I said, with great affability, "that I am still in the dark, but I dare say a very satisfactory explanation will be forthcoming shortly. Won't Mr. Trefusis be getting tired of waiting?"

Acting on the hint, Mr. Telby told his servant to show Trefusis in. I tried to appear unconcerned. Mr. Telby walked with quick, jerky steps between the door and the fireplace. Young Telby, sitting on a chair against the wall, watched the door. I sauntered to the window.

Trefusis came in with his quick, buoyant step, and advanced with outstretched hand towards Mr. Telby. He was shaking hands vigorously when I half turned towards him, and our eyes met. He stopped dead, and his face changed slightly. I came slowly forward.

"He stopped dead, and his face changed slightly."

"Why, Trefusis," I said, "this is an unexpected pleasure!"

"Yes, indeed." His eyes were on mine, and he seemed on the alert. It would be wise to give him the cue. It was for him to take it or reject it.

"I don't think," I said, holding out my hand—not willingly, but it was necessary—"we have met for over a year."

For a single moment he hesitated. Then he touched my hand.

"Quite that, I think," he said.

I drew a breath of relief. There was to be no open scandal. The battle, if any, was to be fought on another field.

Mr. Telby turned to his son. "Now, Gilbert," he said, "you see what an imbecile you have been making of yourself!"

"What has Gilbert been up to?" asked Trefusis in his careless way. He was standing near Gilbert, and slipped his hand through the lad's arm.

Mr. Telby laughed loudly, but with little mirth. "He has been trying to convince me that Mr. Trewint was one of the two thieves that robbed you last night."

Trefusis' glance met mine squarely. He gave a low, amused laugh. "I am afraid Gilbert is a

bit of a donkey," he said, and shook him gently by the arm. "Of course the staircase is rather dark. Besides, I do think," he added judicially, "there is some resemblance, but my visitor was of a heavier make, and, if I am not mistaken, he had a slight mustache."

"No," said Gilbert emphatically, "I am sure he had not."

"Perhaps I am wrong," replied Trefusis indulgently, "but, in any case, Trewint isn't the man. Bless my soul, I've known Trewint for years."

"The suggestion was highly absurd," replied Mr. Telby. "And Gilbert owes Mr. Trewint a very humble apology."

"Oh, nonsense," I interposed hastily. "Trefusis says there was a resemblance, so Gilbert is not so much to blame, after all. I think we can fairly consider the matter at an end."

"Gilbert must express his regret," returned his father, eying him sternly.

"No, no," I exclaimed. I was sorry for the lad, who stood fidgeting on one leg, very red and confused.

"Gilbert!" His father regarded him with rising anger.

"Please, please——" I interjected.

Gilbert shifted from one leg to the other. "Of course," he began at length, "if I am making a mistake, I—I am sorry, but all the same, I can swear——"

His father exploded. "How dare you persist in your cock-and-bull story!" he cried furiously. "Leave the room at once, and do not let me see your face till you can tell me you have expressed your utmost contrition to a gentleman, a friend, of the highest standing, who is kindly putting himself about to assist me. How dare you, sir!" He spluttered with anger, and waved a clenched fist at his son's face.

"Pray, pray——" I implored. I was feeling most uncomfortable. I had embarked on a course of deceit, and poor young Gilbert was paying the penalty.

His father waved me aside. "Your intercession does you every credit," he said, "but this is a matter between my son and myself. I regret to see such pig-headed obstinacy in one in whom, from his bringing up, I am entitled to expect better things. I apologize for him, I apologize most humbly. And before long, I can promise you, he will apologize for himself." Then he turned to the unfortunate lad. "Did you not hear me bid you leave the room? Shall I have to put you out? By Heaven,

if you were a few years younger I would thrash you. As it is, get out of my sight!"

"I can only say what I believe," began Gilbert. "If I am wrong——"

"If you are wrong!" bellowed his father, who had worked himself into a very pretty passion. He rushed at the young man, and began to hustle him towards the door. Gilbert seemed inclined to resent this cavalier treatment, and there was every prospect of an unseemly struggle between father and son, when Trefusis, who was never lacking in tact, intervened.

"Come with me, Gilbert," he said soothingly, "and don't be a duffer." He pulled him gently towards the door. Gilbert, with his head high in the air, suffered himself to be led away.

When the door closed, Mr. Telby wiped his brow with his handkerchief. I stood in uncomfortable silence, half inclined to unbosom myself of the whole stupid story, in order to put things right between father and son, but uneasily conscious that by so doing I should be sacrificing another's interest.

"I need not say," said Mr. Telby, "how much I regret this unfortunate stubbornness on Gilbert's part. But I can promise you he will make proper reparation. And I do trust," he added quickly,

"you will not allow his folly to make any difference between us."

"In what way?" I asked, not catching his drift.

"I trust I may still hope for your kind co-operation during the election."

"Why, of course," I replied, annoyed by the man's selfishness. "And I shall esteem it a very great favor if you will not allude to the matter again."

"I can understand that the subject is an unpleasing one, and I can only express my heartfelt——"

"I mean to your son," I interposed curtly.

"Pray let the matter rest from this moment. Believe me, Gilbert may not be so much to blame as you think. I mean——" for he had looked up quickly, "there really may have been a striking likeness between the man and myself."

"Mr. Trefusis said the likeness was one of the slightest."

"Yes, but——"

"I will, of course, tell my son you have interceded for him, and that in itself should bring him to a proper sense of shame."

"I assure you I do not bear the slightest grudge against Gilbert. I like him for sticking to his con-

victions. If you will promise you will not speak to him on the matter again, I shall go away ever so much easier in my mind."

He set his jaw—a square, determined jaw. "In bringing up my children," he answered, in his sententious style, "I have always endeavored to inculcate those high moral principles to which, if I may say so, I owe my present position in life. I cannot surrender the duty I owe to my children, even at the request of one I esteem so highly as yourself."

"But, you know, Gilbert isn't a child," said I tactlessly.

He frowned. "He is not twenty yet, and, in any case, his age makes his offense more glaring. Can anything be more shameful than to wantonly slander one who has promised to render me the greatest service?"

I took up my hat and stick. It was no use talking. His anger against his son was not so much because of an injury to me, but from fear of a loss to himself.

"Well, good-by, Mr. Telby," I said rather curtly.

"Good-by, Mr. Trewint. I think I can promise that my son will call on you shortly."

"Oh, please don't. But, of course, I shall

be delighted to see Gilbert if he cares to call."

"He will call very shortly," said Mr. Telby, with determination.

"Please don't force him to do so," was my last plea, as I left the room and hastened down the staircase.

"He will do so from his own desire, his innate knowledge of what is right and proper," called out Mr. Telby over the bannisters.

CHAPTER VII

HUMBLE PIE

THE by-election at Trewint had been caused by the elevation to the bench of Mr. H. T. Renton, K. C. The Radical papers had been pleased to designate the appointment a "political job," simply because the new-made judge was more renowned for unobtrusive services to his party than for eminence in the forensic arena. I knew Renton well, and a few days after my interview with Mr. Telby, seeing him dozing in an armchair at the club, I thought it a favorable opportunity of getting his views on the election his resignation had occasioned. One of the weekly papers had headed an article on his appointment with "Who is Mr. Renton?" With this in my hand, I approached him.

"Excuse my troubling you," I said politely, "but would you mind telling me who you are?"

He took the paper I held towards him, scanned the article, and tossed it aside. Then he solemnly winked. "One of His Majesty's judges," he made answer.

I sank into an armchair beside him. "I wish you would give me some information about things at Trewint," I said. "Who are the proper people to kow-tow to? To whom may one be safely rude? Pray give me some local coloring for my speeches."

He roused himself from his lethargy. "Do you ask me for information; you, a Trewint? Hasn't your family its feudal domain in the locality? Aren't half the ignorant populace still laboring in the condition of serfdom? Isn't every Trewint an elemental god?"

"You don't say so!"

He considered. "No," he answered, "I don't. When my connection with Trewint began, it was to all intents and purposes a pocket borough. But the dawn of enlightenment has been spreading rapidly. The increase of manufactories has destroyed the rural simplicity of the place. People now hold meetings to protest against vaccination. Every chapel has its literary society. The day of the Trewints is drawing to a close."

"So bad as all that? Dear, dear!"

He held his finger aloft. "I don't say the name of a Trewint does not still act as a charm. It charms, but it no longer awes."

"Of course," I said mournfully, "if I cannot

awe, I must be content to charm. But what I want to know is, will Telby get in?"

He pondered the question. "If I stood again, I should not get in. For a whole year I have stopped subscribing to local football clubs. Have you seen my wife's new brougham?"

"No, I haven't. But about Telby?"

"He is a great man in his way. He owns the engineering works, and he takes the chair at literary societies, making assertions which frighten. He is a teetotaler and a Nonconformist, and the new Trewint has begotten a love for Dissenters. Then, he has the Trewint influence, of which I see you are to be the exponent."

"A feeble exponent," I said modestly.

"Possibly; I mean, not at all. Don't they know you very well, and love you very much?"

"Hardly, I fear. I have only been at Trewint twice since I left Harrow."

"That may be so, but Trewint has grown into a sporting town, and they study county cricket. You are a hero in Trewint; made of tin, no doubt, but still a hero."

I blushed to hear I was famous. "So you think Telby is safe?"

"No, I don't think he is safe, but I think, if he fights hard, he will get returned. You see, the Con-

servatives will vote for him, for they are well disciplined. And then he has his own personal following, which comes mainly from the other camp."

"A good many diverse elements go to make up this Parliamentary area," I observed thoughtfully.

He nodded. "Trewint is in a state of transition. At one time its interest was mainly agricultural. Now it is becoming a bustling manufacturing center. But the former interest still exists, side by side with the later development. In ten years or so Trewint will be a Radical stronghold. At present, Telby has a chance. It was good tactics choosing Telby."

"I suppose the county is all right for the present? As you know, my brother represents it."

"Oh, yes; that's good till he ripens for his peerage. By the way, how is Lady Trewint? I called one day last week, but she was indisposed."

"Oh, very much better, thanks. I suppose you know the Telby family. What do you think of them?"

"Personally, I can't bear Telby, who bores me to distraction. I am told he is a domestic tyrant, and his children live in terror of his frown. At the same time, if you meet him, he tires you with a list of their many virtues, especially of his son, of

whom he thinks no end. The girls are pretty, and he is very rich. You might do worse than marry one of them. You won't find a handsomer girl than his eldest daughter."

"I know her," I replied laconically. "Very nice, but not clever."

"Who wants a clever wife?"

"I am afraid I am not a marrying man."

"We all say that till we meet the right girl. However, you are young yet."

I rose. "Thanks for your information about Trewint and the Telbys."

"My advice to you," he said, yawning, "is to keep on good terms with the Dissenting element. There is a young parson—by name Vicars—who takes a keen interest in politics, and is esteemed no end of a great man. Try and get on his right side, and it will help you a lot. He speaks well, but is terribly narrow-minded. I have been told he is in love with Telby's eldest daughter, but Telby doesn't think he is good enough. If you can get Vicars to back your man, you will find it an immense assistance. He was against me last time, as I know to my cost."

"If he was Radical last election, he isn't likely to be Conservative this."

"Oh, I don't know. He goes for men, not

measures. That's his crank. His conception of the personal righteousness of the candidate decides his vote and influence. He wants another Barebones' Parliament, I suppose. At any rate, he doesn't associate himself with any political party, but holds himself free to follow the guidance of his conscience. Now, at the last election, I was a mere carpet-bagger, a lawyer without a single fad to cover my nakedness. I loathed the anti-vivisectors and the anti-vaccinators, and wouldn't read papers at their stupid societies. I never go to any church except the Established Church, and that not often. Of course, Mr. Vicars did not like me, and insisted emphatically that I was a mere political adventurer. In fact, the personality of the Radical candidate became merged in the personality of his champion. It became a fight between Vicars and myself, and they fight keenly at Trewint. Thank goodness, I shall not have to go through it again."

"Is this Mr. Vicars a young man?"

He nodded. "As I said before, very eloquent and very able, but terribly narrow. In fact, a crank. Get him on your side, and you'll be all right. If he is against you, then look out for some nasty knocks."

"The chances are, I suppose, that he will be against us?"

"I don't know. Telby goes to his chapel, is a teetotaler, believes in all sorts of fads and folly. I should think he is a man after Vicars' own heart. But, of course, there was the trouble about the young lady."

"Was that anything serious?" I asked curiously.

Renton shrugged his shoulders. "I believe Vicars was attracted by the girl, and the father spotted it. I think he stopped Vicars coming to the house. But I really don't know the relationship between them now. Telby still goes to the chapel."

"Is this Vicars an educated man?"

"He went to Oxford. You went there, too, didn't you? I should think he might have been a contemporary of yours."

"Vicars, Vicars," I repeated meditatively. "Do you know his College? At any rate, I don't suppose he was quite the type of man I should know."

"He went in for athletics a good deal. Got his blue—football, I think."

"By Jove, I remember a football Vicars. Tall, dark, with a slight stoop. Awfully keen on anything he took up. Is that the man?"

"That's him to a T. Then you know him?"

I shook my head doubtfully. "Only very slightly. He was older than I, a couple of years at least. We had an encounter once at the Union. He was on the side of the angels, and I was on the other side. I remember he was angry, and retorted, rather bitterly, that I was a mere trifler, unworthy of serious consideration, and so forth; which was true enough, no doubt."

I saw Renton was getting bored.

"Well, you'll be able to renew the Homeric contests of your youth," he said. "Just pass me the *Spectator*, will you? I am sure it is too well-bred to confess it doesn't know who I am."

The time was drawing near when the campaign at Trewint would open in earnest. The official notification of Renton's appointment had appeared in the papers, and the respective party organizations at Trewint were girding themselves for the fray. The Liberal candidate was a local solicitor, not nearly so wealthy as Telby, nor, of course, an employer of labor, but a man whose antecedents were respectable and whose reputation for integrity was high. His views on the side issues of the day were still unknown, but it was understood that the inner circle of the Radical Associa-

tion were busily engaged in framing them, but that for tactical reasons, they would not be published until the last moment, so as to give latitude for revision and correction. Political feeling in the country was high, and the press had already given indications that considerable attention would be directed to the struggle.

I had not heard from Mr. Telby or his son since our unpleasant interview some days before. I hoped that, on consideration, Mr. Telby had given up his intention of compelling his son to apologize to me for a mistake which the poor fellow had never made. Unfortunately, I was wrong. The delay, it turned out, was due to Gilbert's recalcitrance. One day, on returning to my chambers, I found the young man awaiting me. When I entered the room he was standing in the middle of the floor, with a flushed face, evidently ill at ease.

I greeted him cordially. "This is very kind!" I exclaimed. "Now, do sit down." And I bustled about with great energy in my endeavor to lessen the embarrassment which I shared equally with my visitor.

"Thank you," he said, "I won't sit down. I only called for a moment——"

"But you must sit down." I half hustled him

into an armchair. "And let me offer you a cigar."

He declined my proffered gift, sitting on the edge of his chair, gloomily contemplating the toes of his patent-leather boots.

"How is your father?" I asked, endeavoring to keep up a brisk conversation.

"All right," he answered shortly, and his gloom visibly deepened.

I soon ran through my stock of available remarks, but the fear of silence oppressed me.

"It is kind of you to call and see me," I repeated.

"My father made me."

I tried to indicate by my manner that I regarded his reply as humorously intended. "You have no idea how glad I am when men look me up," I continued. "Living alone, one sometimes feels——"

"I've led a dog's life since I saw you last," he burst out. "I don't suppose you can imagine what a brute the governor can be when he likes. You see him all milk and sugar——"

"I hope it isn't in reference to that stupid affair——" I began.

"Yes, it is," he replied savagely. "He said I must apologize to you. I told him I wouldn't,

that nothing in the world would make me do so. For a week we have been going it hammer and tongs. Life hasn't been worth living. For two pins I would cut it and enlist."

"I am sorry, so very sorry," I responded. "I am sure you recognize that it was far from my desire that you should apologize to me."

"Oh, yes," he said hastily. "I know quite well you don't care a brass farthing whether I beg your pardon or not. Why should you? But the governor fears you are offended; that if I don't come crawling to you on all-fours like a whipped dog, he won't have the Trewint influence at that confounded election."

"My dear fellow," I exclaimed, "do, for Heaven's sake, let us agree between ourselves to consider the matter at an end. We will not say a single word more about it."

He frowned moodily. "I told him I wouldn't apologize, but—but——"

"You were quite right," I rejoined heartily. "I shall think very little of you if you give way."

"But I have given way," he replied, flushing. "What's the good of living the life of a dog? And he's cut off my allowance. As if a man can live in town without money! I've had to borrow

from my sisters and—and—my friends. It's beastly! So I've come to beg your pardon."

"My dear boy," I protested, appalled at the prospect, "please don't do anything so absurd. If you only knew how uncomfortable you make me feel, you really wouldn't have the heart to go on."

"I've promised the governor; we fought it out for a whole week, and I gave in. So I shall have to——"

"We will take it as spoken," I said beseechingly. "Don't press the matter further, there's a dear, kind lad."

He put his hand in his breast-pocket and produced a sheet of note-paper. "The governor," he said shamefacedly, "has written down what I have to say. If you don't mind, I'll just read it."

I sat with my head in my hands. If Mr. Telby had known how I hated him at that moment, it would have disturbed even his smug complacency.

Gilbert smoothed out the paper, and began to read in a rapid whisper, "'I apologize to you, Mr. Trewint, very humbly, for having made such a ridiculous accusation about you. It was very foolish and wrong of me, and I ought to be punished severely. I sincerely beg your pardon and

trust you will forgive me.' There!" He tore the paper savagely across, set his teeth, and glowered at me.

I drew a long breath. "Well, at any rate, it's over. You've done what your father required. I suppose now we can consider the matter at an end."

"There's one thing, also. My father says I am to ask you to write him a line saying that I have—have done what he wanted. He says that after my conduct he cannot trust me to—tell him the truth."

I sprang out of my chair. "My dear fellow, what a shame to treat you like this! It is I who owe you an apology, and I do beg you to forgive me for causing you this humiliation. I can't tell you how sorry I am, or how distressed I feel! If I can do anything in the whole world to prove this to you——"

"You can write that letter."

"Yes, yes; I will write anything you like, but it is too bad of your father to place us both in this miserable position."

"If you will write that letter now," he replied, with averted head, "I will take it away with me."

"I will write it, of course." Full of compunction, I sat down at my writing table and drew paper towards me. "What am I to say?"

"It will be enough if you say I called and apologised for my mistake."

"For your mistake?" I hesitated, and then threw down my pen. "I don't care to use that phrase."

He sighed wearily. "It really doesn't matter how it is put."

I thought a moment, and then I scribbled some words. "Will this do?" I asked. "'Dear Mr. Telby, I have seen your son Gilbert, who has apologized fully. I am sorry he thought it necessary to do so. I trust the incident may now be considered finally closed.'"

He nodded. "Thank you, it will do very well."

I folded it and put it in an envelope, which I addressed. Then I turned towards him.

"Gilbert," I said rather impulsively, "now this stupid affair is at an end, will you shake hands?"

He had sunk back into his armchair with an expression of dejection on his face. He did not answer.

"You don't care to?" I said sadly. "Well, it can't be helped."

He roused himself suddenly, with a bitter laugh. "Why shouldn't I shake hands with you? You're a better man than I am, at any rate. I am a poor,

miserable, weak-spirited wretch, humbly apologizing when I know I have made no mistake. If I haven't robbed anyone, I dare say it's because I have never been tempted. Oh, yes; I'll shake hands, if you like."

I was disconcerted to find he considered me fit to shake hands with simply because he felt himself morally degraded. For some moments I regarded him in silence, feeling exactly as if someone had slapped my face.

"You still believe I am the man you met on the staircase the other night?"

He looked up quickly. "I suppose if I say so you will tell my father?"

"No, I won't. What do you take me for?"

"Do you know who opened the door for me when I called this afternoon?"

"I don't understand."

"It was Trefusis' servant—late servant, I suppose I should say."

For the second time I experienced a moral shock.

"Why don't you go and tell your father that?" I asked at length.

"What's the good? I suppose Trefusis would deny point-blank that the fellow had ever been in his service. Besides, I haven't the least desire to

get you into trouble. But I do object to being forced to apologize to a man I know is a thief."

I am afraid I swore under my breath. "Why did you apologize, then?" I asked.

"I had to." The dull, red flush began to creep over his temples again.

"It has been hard lines on you," I returned meditatively. "But, Trefusis—isn't he a friend of yours?"

He nodded.

"Why, then, do you suppose he has also conspired to injure you?"

"I don't know. To spare your family, very likely."

"I don't think Trefusis is anxious to do that," I said, with a short laugh. "I say, young man, how old are you?"

"I'm nearly twenty."

"If you will forgive me saying so, you are not very intelligent for your age."

"I'm not in a position to resent any insults," he replied dejectedly.

"I don't want to insult you," I returned, "but I do want you to think. Assuming I was present on the night in question, don't you consider my presence and my actions can be explained otherwise than as you explain them—as a regular thief making

off with silver spoons? You know about me and my family. Is it probable—is it even possible—that I would act from the motives you impute to me? Don't you think there may be more in the matter than lies on the surface? And don't you think you might give me the benefit of the doubt?"

He was silent for some minutes, and then he rose from his chair.

"I really don't care what motive took you to Trefusis' chambers. I only know you were the man I met coming out, and I have had to knuckle down and say you weren't. That's what hurts." He smiled a rather watery smile. "The fact is, I am a beastly coward and afraid of the governor, and I am ashamed of myself for it. Good-by. I will shake hands if you like."

Our hands met in a not very cordial grasp.

"I know you have suffered a good deal through me," I said, "and I can only repeat I am very sorry."

"Oh, that's all right," he replied awkwardly. "And—and you haven't given me the letter."

I gave it to him, and he took it without a word. He moved towards the door.

"I wish to goodness I could tell your father the whole facts of the case, but there are others to be considered," I observed.

He stood for some moments with his hand on the door-knob.

"You said I wasn't very intelligent," he replied at length. "I think that's quite true. I admit it occurred to me that perhaps you were in need of money, and that was your reason for—doing as you did. But I see now that's absurd. I have already apologized to you because my father said I must, but, on my own account, I am sorry I called you a thief."

"Thank you." I was touched; and with a sudden impulse I added, "Look here, shall I go and tell your father that you made no mistake? I can't give him reasons, but I can tell him you were quite right."

"No, it wouldn't do any good."

"You are sure?"

"I am certain."

"I am not sure," I said thoughtfully, "that I oughtn't to go."

"I beg you not to do so," he said quickly. "Surely you understand that my father *wants* you to be innocent. It would be so awkward about the election if you were not. And he would only be angry with me for having made you confess. Besides all that, it would be giving the lie direct to Trefusis, who is my only friend."

"Trefusis is your only friend, is he?" I asked slowly.

Perhaps there was disapproval in my voice, for he looked up defiantly.

"Have you anything to say against him?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Would it be any good? And yet——"

"And yet?"

I glanced at him. He was standing by the door, his shoulders square, and the light of battle in his eyes.

"If I had a younger brother, and he came and told me that Trefusis was his only friend, I should do my utmost to put an end to the friendship."

"This comes well from you," he replied, with angry emphasis. "He has acted as your friend, at any rate."

"I knew it would be useless to warn you."

"It would be useless for you to warn me."

He went out quickly, shutting the door with some violence.

CHAPTER VIII

BROTHERLY SOLICITUDE

I RECEIVED a peremptory note from my brother, bidding me call on him before I left town for Trewint. Accordingly, I turned up at lunch-time on the day previous to my departure for the scene of the approaching conflict. I found Mabel alone.

"Why haven't you been to see me before?" she said reproachfully. "I have been living in a perfect fever of anxiety, and not a word from you. It is really not kind."

I glanced round the room. "Where's Gerald?"

"He's in his study, very busy. We've a minute or two to ourselves before lunch. Now tell me everything."

"About what?"

"Oh, you know well enough. For days I haven't dared to open a newspaper or look Gerald in the face. Oh, Fred, how could you?"

"Could I—what?"

"Act in such a hare-brained fashion. Didn't I tell you on no account to use violence?"

"Just like you, Mabel," I replied resignedly. "I knew I should get blamed, whatever I did."

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. "I don't blame you, Fred. You acted too nobly for anything. I am not worth it." A delicate lace handkerchief was lifted to her eyes. "But, oh, it frightens me!"

"My dear Mabel," I replied, "the whole thing is over and forgotten by this time. Pray don't revive it."

"But Mr. Trefusis? How he must hate you! I am sure he is only biding his time."

"Let him!" I replied, with heroism. "And there's the gong."

We went into the dining room, and in a few minutes Gerald came tearing in with a sheaf of loose papers in his hand.

"Morning, Fred. I'm frightfully busy, as usual. Why haven't you been to see me about the election? Your usual laziness, I suppose. And here have I been working like a slave for you,"—he waved the papers in the air—"although I haven't a moment to spare."

"You're always so good," I said, unfolding my napkin. "And what is your latest kindness?"

"Gerald, dear," interposed his wife, "won't you put those papers away and attend to your lunch?"

He sat down, propping his bundle of manuscript against a sherry decanter, and knocking over a wine-glass.

"I've been drafting out your speech for the first meeting. 'Ladies and Gentlemen——'"

"Gerald, dear," said his wife, with excessive sweetness, "would you mind removing that piece of paper from the sauce-bowl?"

"Yes, dear. 'It is a matter of great regret to my brother, Sir Gerald Trewint, that ministerial business of the utmost importance prevents him——'"

"Your soup is getting cold, dear," observed his wife, with slight asperity. "Won't you leave Fred's speech till afterwards?"

"There is so little time," explained my brother. "Fred, with his usual dilatoriness, has left the matter so late."

"Oh, don't bother to read it aloud," I put in. "I'll glance over what you have written as soon as I have a moment to spare."

"It will take you all your time to learn it," said my brother warningly. "You must put your shoulder to the wheel."

"To learn it?" I asked, astonished.

"Of course, you must have it by heart," replied Gerald irritably. "You can't read it; no one will listen to a speech that is read."

"You really expect me to learn all those pages off by heart?" I exclaimed. "Really, Gerald, you are very sanguine."

He laid down the papers and regarded me with rising indignation.

"Do you mean to tell me, sir," he said, "that after all the trouble I have taken to prevent you making a most absolute ass of yourself, by penning some judicious and carefully considered observations for you to deliver, you will decline to put yourself to the slight mental effort of committing them to memory? Answer me, sir?"

"Parsons," said Mabel, in an aside to the butler, "take those papers out of Sir Gerald's soup."

"My dear Gerald," I returned, "I should be delighted to do anything in reason to please you, but I never could commit things to memory. Don't you remember how I used to get whacked by old Madame Longlegs because my Collects would get mixed up with profane ditties?"

"Who was Madame Longlegs?" asked Mabel, to create a diversion.

"It is a ribald name for a very deserving lady,"

said Gerald, "who acted as Fred's governess. I do not exaggerate when I assert that Fred broke the good woman's heart."

"But if Fred can't commit things to memory, it's no good worrying, is it, dear? Now, I'm rather good at that kind of thing. At private theatricals I am a tremendously quick study. Don't you remember, Fred, at the Storeys' what fun we had——"

My brother made a gesture of impatience. "Pray do not encourage Fred in his folly. Just consider for a moment what he is likely to do if his speeches are not composed by me. Bring before your mental vision a crowded and excited meeting, and Fred, a lonely imbecile, in the chair."

"Why 'lonely,' and why 'imbecile'?" I ventured.

"That's how you will feel. Do you think I have no experience of public meetings?"

"Oh, of course, if that's your experience——"

"Everyone waits expectantly, and then he rises, opens his mouth, and talks disjointed incoherent rubbish, stuttering and stammering, while the whole place rocks with laughter."

"Are you still drawing on your experience?" I asked.

He glared at me. "No, sir; I would not venture to insult an audience by speaking without careful preparation. I do not loaf into a meeting, imagining that any baby nonsense that rises to the surface of my mind is good enough. Before venturing to speak, I spend hours of careful thought upon my subject. I owe this to myself and to the public. But, of course, in your overweening conceit, you think such preliminary labor is unnecessary. You imagine——"

"I am sure Fred will make most amusing speeches," said Mabel, who was evidently anxious to constitute herself my champion.

"Amusing! Flippant, do you mean? With quips and cranks that would disgrace a clown in a provincial circus! And great issues are at stake! The whole country is watching with eagerness the result of this election; the Government may even take its cue from it. And Fred thinks the time fit for buffoonery."

"Really, Gerald, you go rather too far," I expostulated mildly. "And all because I tell you I am mentally incapable of committing long screeds to memory. Besides, though your speeches are very logical and convincing, they are not the least fitted for election platforms. You had much better leave me to do the best I can."

"I am sure it will be best to let Fred manage for himself," Mabel indorsed.

"Of course, I shall be glad to read your speech through and make notes," I continued, "but I really cannot undertake to learn it off by heart."

"I think Fred ought to have a chance of distinguishing himself," observed Mabel. "His style is so different from yours that people would see at once that you had written his speech."

"Your giant's robe will only embarrass me," I put in by way of conciliation. "The ass in the lion's skin wasn't at all a success."

My brother was so indignant that for some minutes he found it difficult to speak. "Your simile shows a very proper appreciation of the rôle you will play," he said bitterly. "But so be it. I wash my hands of you. Go and make a laughing-stock of yourself. Go and bring our honored name into ridicule. Lose the election. Do what you like. I will not raise a finger to prevent you."

Of course, as soon as Mabel saw that Gerald was seriously annoyed, she began to waver in her allegiance to me.

"Perhaps, Fred, it will be better if you try to learn by heart what Gerald has written. It is a pity to waste it. And then it will save you a lot of trouble."

"No, Mabel," interposed her husband, "leave him to learn from experience. I have done with him. Let him play antics in the sight of God and man. Do not attempt to show him his folly."

"I think, Fred, you ought to do what Gerald wants," said Mabel, entirely veering round. "Considering the difference in your ages, I sometimes feel you hardly treat Gerald with sufficient respect."

"Oh, bother!" I replied. "Here, give me those papers. Anything for a quiet life." I seized them and shoved them into my breast pocket, with a mental resolve to commit the speech, not to memory, but to the flames, at the first opportunity.

It took some little time for Gerald to recover his good humor, but before lunch was over he was cramming me with the repartees he had found useful in his electioneering campaigns. I listened with docility, and soon Gerald had received me back into favor.

"By the way," he said, "you'll see a good deal of that Telby girl." He winked at his wife. "Fine girl, eh, Fred?"

"Oh, very nice," said I, breaking a walnut with my fingers.

"Her father will give her a good round sum when she marries."

"How do you know that?" I asked, looking up.

"A little bird told me."

"I don't believe little birds," I replied, "and I don't care, anyhow."

"I know it on the best authority," he went on. "I don't know why I shouldn't tell you that Telby told me so himself."

"Oh, indeed!" I intercepted a warning glance passing from Mabel to her husband, and I wondered where the conversation was tending.

"Six figures, Fred. You may take it for certain."

"I am really not interested."

Mabel intervened. "You might do worse, Fred. And—it is time you settled down."

I glanced up. "Oh, that's the idea, is it? Six figures, did you say? Well, she's a handsome girl."

Mabel and Gerald exchanged smiles.

"But I'm afraid," I continued, "she'd worry me into my grave. She's a perfect idiot."

"Suit you splendidly," said my brother enthusiastically.

"I don't suppose Mr. Telby would hear of it."

"Oh, yes, he would," returned my brother incautiously.

"What, the matter's been mooted?"

Gerald hesitated, grew confused, and stammered out a half denial, following it immediately with a half admission.

I frowned thoughtfully. "Ought not love to enter into affairs of this kind?"

"Certainly," said Mabel, with great decision.

"Well, I'm not in love with her."

"You've only seen her once."

"Oh, I see; it is contingent on our falling in love."

"Why, certainly," responded Mabel.

"A young man," remarked my brother, "has usually no difficulty on that score."

"Unless he already loves someone," suggested my sister-in-law. "Do you, Fred?"

"Certainly not," replied my brother for me, with extreme annoyance at the suggestion.

"Then I don't see," observed Mabel, "why it can't be arranged. It would be the making of you, Fred."

"I don't care to be wife-made," I retorted. "I would even prefer to be self-made."

"In the latter case," said Gerald, "you would be very badly made. But we needn't discuss the

matter further. Everything depends on Fred, so I have little hope."

"The girl has to say a word or so," I hinted.

"Mr. Telby has brought his family up very well," replied Gerald.

"You mean," said I, "the unhappy girl will do what she is told?"

"She will realize her father knows best."

"You don't suppose," I rejoined with indignation, "that I will be a party to any compulsion?"

"I don't see," retorted Gerald dryly, "how you can otherwise expect to get married."

"Then I'll remain single."

"Don't annoy him, dear," said Mabel to her husband. "He's only teasing you," she said to me. "Why, hundreds of girls would give their heads to marry Fred," she threw to her husband.

"In Miss Telby's case, it would not be a great gift," I observed.

"If she gives her heart," said Mabel gently, "won't that be enough?"

I shrugged my shoulders, and helped myself to a cigar from my brother's cabinet. "I'll think about it."

Soon after I took my leave, not a little disconcerted at the prospect which had suddenly opened before me. It was with reluctance that I had

agreed to take part in the Trewint election. It had been arranged without my sanction that I should stay with the Telbys; and now, it appeared, I was to have small share in the choice of a wife.

It is very pleasant to drift through life; to be at the helm continually is fatiguing. How much better to lie on one's back and watch, half drowsily, the clear summer skies overhead, letting the boat go where it will. At the same time, if it has to be steered, one rather likes to have a hand in the operation. Why should one's relations be entitled to constitute themselves pilots? It is really annoying to discover that some officious person has clambered on board and is steadily steering towards troubled waters.

CHAPTER IX

MILLY

I AM really sorry, Tarling," I said, "but it is impossible to take you with me."

"Very good, sir," he replied, swallowing his disappointment.

"You see," I explained apologetically, "it might be a little awkward. Someone might recognize you as having been in Mr. Trefusis' service, and it might get to old Telby's ears."

His face betokened enlightenment. "I see it's impossible, sir."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "I suppose you want to see your mother?"

"It's rather she wants to see me, sir. She knows I am with you, and very proud of it she is. And, of course, she expects me to come down with you."

"She's still at the East Lodge, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir."

"There's no reason," I said, after a moment's reflection, "why you shouldn't go and stay with her. Say I have given you a holiday."

He looked up, full of gratitude. "I'll come to your meetings and shout 'Hooray!'"

I laughed. "That's as you like."

I left for Trewint by the morning train, which, in the ordinary course, would have given me half an hour for lunch at Middleton Junction. However, on arriving there, a porter came hurrying to tell me a train for Trewint was just starting.

"How's that?" I asked. "I thought I had half an hour?"

"It's the morning express," he explained. "Been delayed by a goods train off the line."

It is not often that an accident accelerates a railway journey, but in the present case I was landed at Trewint an hour before I was due. There was hardly a soul in the brand-new red-brick station that had taken the place of the wooden shanty to which I was accustomed. There was a new station-master, who knew me not from Adam, and if he had, I do not suppose he would have cared. Alas, how our glory had departed! There was a time when the railway officials fought for the honor of carrying a Trewint's bag from the platform to the carriage. I ventured to ask him if I could get a fly, and he replied, indifferently, that there was sometimes one in the yard. The only

porter in sight was collecting tickets, so I carried my own traps outside, and, piling them in a solitary heap, gazed about for some means of conveyance. Of course, there was none in view.

I hesitated for a moment, and then, not presuming to address the highly placed official who had treated my former advances with nonchalance, I asked the porter, a pleasant-faced lad, with a shock of red hair, which he had evidently endeavored to oil into submission, how I could get to Dewhurst, Mr. Telby's residence. I had no longer to complain of neglect, for he took at once a personal interest in the matter. He told me where it was located, which I knew already, and the exact distance, and some other details which did not bear on the problem.

"Do you think I could get a trap at the 'Swan'?" I asked him.

He was willing to go and ask, and was half-way across the yard, when I changed my mind, and called him back.

"On the whole," I said, "I'd rather walk. Can you put these things," I indicated the desolate heap, "in the booking office till they are called for?"

He approved of the suggestion, and laid hands with great willingness on my bag.

"By the way," I continued, "do you know Mr. Telby by sight?"

Of course he did. His manner gave me to understand I had asked a ridiculous question.

"Well, will you tell him that I caught an earlier train, and that I am walking to Dewhurst?"

"Yes, sir. What name shall I say?"

"Oh, Trewint—Mr. Trewint."

He dropped the bag with a thud on the stones.

"Not—not Freddy Trewint?"

I regarded him with surprise, and I suppose I should have reproved him for undue familiarity if his manners had not returned with a rush that colored his face the hue of his hair.

"I beg pardon, sir," he apologized. "But we always speak of you like that."

"It's very good of you to speak of me at all;" I said, "but why?"

He explained; it seemed he followed with kindly interest my exploits in the cricket field. I forgave him at once. His manner indicated that he regarded me as a great man.

"Well, all right," I said. "You'll be sure to tell Mr. Telby I've gone on?"

"Miss Telby is in the town," he informed me eagerly. "I saw her go past on her bicycle. I think she's at the Mission Hall."

"Is that far?" It would be pleasant to see her again, especially as it had been arranged that I was to marry her some day.

"Oh, no, sir; just across the way. Shall I go and fetch her?"

It did not seem quite the thing to send a porter to fetch a young lady. "You might run across," said I, "and tell her that I have arrived before my time, and ask her if she knows where her father is, as I want to stop him troubling to come to meet me. Can you remember all that?"

He went off at a run, and I carried my luggage into the booking office. I was detained a few minutes by the clerk insisting on collecting twopence for each package, as he called the items of my baggage. When I emerged again into the station yard, it was to find a young lady, and a gentleman in clerical attire, and the porter, all engaged in propping a bicycle against the station wall.

"Here is Mr. Trewint, miss," said the porter, kindly introducing me.

The young lady, who was certainly not the Miss Telby I knew, advanced quickly and offered her hand.

"I am sorry no one was here to meet you, Mr. Trewint. Papa will be so vexed."

I took her hand. "I am to blame. Or, perhaps, it was the driver who ran his engine off the line. In any case, it doesn't matter."

"Oh, but how are you to get to Dewhurst?" she asked.

"I propose to walk."

"It does seem inhospitable to make a guest walk five miles. I dare say we can get a trap at the 'Swan.'"

"Pray don't bother. I shall like the walk."

She gave the most natural little laugh in the world. "We must manage to get you there somehow. So much depends on you, you know. And —and—Mr. Vicars, may I introduce Mr. Trewint?"

The gentleman so named came forward and shook me by the hand, not very cordially.

"I think we know each other," he observed.

"Oh, yes, of course," said I, not remembering him in the least.

"At Oxford."

"Ah, yes, yes. You're the football Vicars?"

"I used to play football in my younger days," he replied grimly, "when life was not, perhaps, regarded as a very serious thing."

I put him down at once for a prig. He was a tall, loosely made man, with a thin face

and deep, melancholy eyes. I began to recall him.

"I remember," I said lightly. "I used to be rude to you at the Union."

He did not seem anxious to discuss the incidents of 'Varsity life, for he turned away. "If you like, Miss Millicent," he said, "I will call at the 'Swan' as I pass."

"Oh, please don't trouble," I said hastily. "I have really set my heart on walking."

"Shall I walk with you?" asked the girl. She could not have been much more than twenty, and she was extremely pretty—not beautiful like her sister, but bright and altogether charming.

I tried not to show too much eagerness. "That would be delightful," I replied, "but it will tire you too much."

"Tire me!" She laughed at the idea.

"And you have a bicycle?"

"Oh, I can wheel it."

"I'll do that, of course," I answered, "but it's too bad to make you walk all that long distance. What a pity I didn't bring mine!" A thought struck me. "I suppose you couldn't lend me one, Mr. Vicars?"

"I do not cycle," he rejoined shortly.

"It would be rather nice if you could borrow a

bicycle," remarked the girl. She looked round vaguely, and her glance fell on the porter who was standing near, evidently feeling he was one of the party. "Why, Robert," she said, "I know you bicycle. Won't you lend yours to Mr. Trewint?"

"It will be very kind of you, Robert, if you will," I added.

Robert glowed with pleasure. "It aint much of a one," he said warningly.

"It will do splendidly," I assured him. "Have you got it handy?"

"It's in the shed," he answered, and darted off to fetch it.

"Robert is in my Bible class," said the girl to me confidentially. "He is a dear boy." She turned to Vicars. "You like him, too, don't you, Mr. Vicars?"

"I think he has the making of a good man in him," he answered abstractedly.

"Robert is in love with one of our maids. They're 'walking out,' and he often comes to Dewhurst. And oh, Mr. Trewint, don't insult the poor boy by tipping him before us all. If you will ride his bicycle, it will make him so proud."

It was delightful to find her so considerate of

Robert's feelings. I decided at that moment I preferred her to her elder sister.

Robert came back wheeling his machine, and simultaneously dusting it with his cap. Regarded simply as a bicycle, it was not, perhaps, the highest example of its kind. It had a "solid" tire, part of which had been chipped off by constant wear. Even as its proud owner wheeled it towards us, it groaned ominously.

"It's just the thing," I said heartily, "though, perhaps, the saddle needs raising."

This was done with some difficulty, for the screws were stiff. When all was ready, I took a trial trip round the yard.

"Beautiful!" I cried enthusiastically, as it pumped and rattled over the ground. "Are you ready, Miss Telby?"

Miss Telby was quite ready. She gave some directions about my luggage, shook hands with Vicars, and prepared to mount her own machine.

"By the way, how shall I return this to you, Robert?" I asked him.

"I'll be up at Dewhurst to-night, sir," said Robert, very red in the face.

"Good boy," remarked Miss Telby approvingly. I nodded to Vicars, and, following my

guide, we left the station yard in fine style, and spun along the main road.

"It's as good as horse-riding," I observed, as my steed bumped madly over a puddle in a vain endeavor to gain on the pretty figure that seemed to skim over the ground in front of me.

"You remind me of a luggage train," she laughed. "What a terrible noise you are making!"

"I shan't require a bell, which is fortunate, as I haven't got one." Making a great effort, I managed to get abreast of her, and we rode along in silence.

At length she turned her head and regarded me with some curiosity.

"I have heard so much of you," she said. "And—you're not a bit what I expected."

"What have you heard?" I asked anxiously. "In any case, it isn't true."

"Perhaps not," she observed thoughtfully, and she paused. "Molly tells me everything," she continued after an interval.

"Miss Molly has told me about you," I rejoined. "That is, if you are Miss Milly, as I assume."

"Oh, yes; I'm Milly. But what did Molly say about me?"

"She said you were terribly clever."

She laughed rather constrainedly. "That's what Molly thinks, I know, but——"

"I shan't believe you if you deny it," I said. "Of course, no one would admit a thing like that. I think, though, it is better to pretend to be a perfect idiot, and then one's friends accept an occasional glimmer of sense with gratitude."

"I suppose then it is clever not to seem clever?" she asked.

"That, at any rate, is my theory," I replied guardedly. "But what have you heard about me? Nothing to my good, I expect?"

"No; nothing to your good," she answered gravely.

I was taken aback by her serious tone and the directness of her answer.

"May I ask for particulars?" I ventured.

She turned her head and smiled slightly. "No, I don't think you may." The next moment she changed her mind. "Perhaps I had better tell you that Molly and Gilbert are great chums, and, naturally, Molly takes Gilbert's part."

"I begin to understand," I remarked.

"Things have been very uncomfortable at home lately," she continued in a low voice. "Perhaps I oughtn't to say anything. It—it is so difficult

to know when to speak and when to be silent. I should not have said a word if you had been different, but—but——"

"But—what?"

"Well, you seem good-natured," she went on hurriedly, "and I think perhaps you will understand; and—and—it may save awkwardness."

"Pray go on."

She turned her head away. "Gilbert has told Molly everything. He has promised father to apologize to you, but he still believes what he said at first."

I nodded. "I know that."

"He will apologize because father makes him, not because he thinks he has made a mistake."

"I know that too. I am very sorry your father pressed him to do so."

"Molly believes what Gilbert says, and—and she is angry that poor Gilbert should have been obliged to—to give in. She told father that if you came to Dewhurst she would refuse to speak to you. Oh, there have been such terrible scenes! You don't know Molly well, I suppose? She is very sweet and gentle, but if she once makes up her mind, nothing will make her change it. She can be as obstinate as father."

I sighed. "How unfortunate everything is!"

She looked at me anxiously. "You're not annoyed?"

"Only with myself. I didn't want to come to Dewhurst, but it was all arranged without consulting me. I feel the most absolute brute in the world. If you will only suggest something—even to drowning myself in that pond—I'll do it."

"I've told you this because I want you to stand between Molly and father. Not by speaking to him," she added hastily. "Oh, no; not by speaking, but simply by trying to prevent Molly from seeming rude. Do you understand?"

"Shall I turn round and go back to town?"

"Oh, no," she cried in alarm. "Please, please, don't. That would make things so terrible. Father would be in such a rage if he thought you were annoyed about anything. Pray don't go away."

"Of course, I won't then," I answered; but at the same time I felt a little bewildered; and I wondered what course of action she wished me to adopt. She noticed my perplexity.

"It's difficult to explain," she said. "But if Molly is rude, please don't show you notice it. And please try and prevent father from noticing it, also."

My brain was in a whirl. "I'll do everything I

can," I said. "She won't speak to me, you say? I am in the position of a guest whose hostess declines to recognize his presence, but I have to try and pretend that everything is as pleasant as possible."

"So that father mayn't notice."

"I'll do what I can." The prospect was full of woe.

She laid a little hand on my arm. "It will be horrid for you; oh, so horrid!"

"I deserve it all, and a great deal more."

"I'll help you all I can," she whispered.

"Thank you, very much. By the way, is Gilbert here?"

She shook her head. I felt relieved.

"So Miss Telby thinks I am a thief?" I observed after a pause.

She did not answer, but the color flew to her cheek. I ventured as near her as safety would permit.

"Do you, also, think I am a thief?"

The flush deepened, but still she did not speak.

"I see you do," I said sadly.

Her bicycle gave a sudden wobble. "Oh, please don't misunderstand me," she cried. "I only mean I don't think Gilbert made a mistake.

I am certain there is a great deal more in the matter than we know. I have told Molly so, over and over again."

"She is not prepared to give me the benefit of any doubt?"

"Well, no."

"It can't be helped."

"What a pity Gilbert met you."

"I agree, very heartily."

She turned her head and smiled. "Why, you have admitted it was you!"

"So I have," I sighed. "The fact is, I make only a third-rate criminal."

"Why did you do it?" she asked curiously. "You weren't in want of—of money?"

"Oh, no, no!" I cried. "It was for quite a different reason."

"But you can't tell?"

"It is impossible to tell."

She rode on thoughtfully. "I am only a woman," she said at length, "and awfully curious. But I won't ask you any more questions."

I thanked her. "I give you my word," I said earnestly, "that I haven't done anything really dishonorable. What I did, I had to do; and if it had to be done again, I expect I should do it again. But I am sorry for your brother."

"Let us agree not to talk about it any more. I believe what you have said."

We were approaching Dewhurst. In the distance a trap was approaching us, and as it drew near I saw Mr. Telby was driving it. His face expressed astonishment at finding me in his daughter's company. We stopped and dismounted, and explained the situation.

"I'll drive on to Trewint," he said, "and get your luggage, or if you are tired of that remarkable machine, I'll drive you back to Dewhurst."

"Not at all," I replied quickly. "I am enjoying my ride."

He waved his hand as he drove off. Milly and I remounted our bicycles.

"It is lucky," she observed reflectively, "that he won't be present when you meet Molly."

"I do trust," I said nervously, "there won't be a scene."

"Oh, no." But her tone expressed some doubt.

In a few minutes we reached the iron gate that separated Dewhurst from the main road, and we skimmed up the avenue.

"You're going to stand my friend?" I said apprehensively. There was something awe-inspiring in the solid stone house that rose before us. It

reminded me of a prison. "Remember, I am only one."

She smiled encouragement. "I will protect you against Molly, and you must protect Molly against father. It's a bargain."

"If you are on my side," I replied, "I am ready to face anything."

"I am on your side," she answered. Our eyes happened to meet, and, for no reason, we averted them in confusion.

It can be under no circumstances a pleasurable experience to stay at a house whose mistress you know regards you with aversion. But when you are forewarned that she has registered a vow not to speak to you, you may surely be forgiven if you cross the threshold with much the same feelings you would enter a penitentiary.

A footman took away my bicycle, which he regarded with an expression of surprise. I followed Milly into the house with a sinking heart. More than once an insane desire to escape gripped me. Should I turn and rush for the open, recapture the porter's bicycle, and pedal like mad towards the railway station and London? But such a course would hardly be a dignified one, and, besides, was I not under terms of alliance with Milly? Never, never, would I leave her to face

her father's wrath alone. Full of this chivalrous resolve, I followed her boldly into the hall.

"We usually have tea here," she said, and rang a bell. "I wonder where Molly is?" she added absently, peeling off her gloves. "I must go and find her."

"Is it necessary?" I asked.

"You had better see her before—before father gets back." She screwed her face up ruefully. "Isn't all this simply horrid?"

"It's disgusting," said I, with emphasis. The servant brought in the tea, and Milly poured me out a cup. "I am afraid you must be starving," she said. "Toast or tea-cake?"

I decided for tea-cake, helping myself largely, for I had had no lunch. She poured out a cup of tea for herself and drank it slowly, still standing. Her eyes for an instant smiled at me over the rim.

"What a blessing tea is!" she said almost cheerfully. "I feel better already. Have another cup?"

I had another cup. "This tea-cake is helping me a lot," I observed, with my mouth full. "Do try it."

So she tried it. I begged her to sit down.

"I feel quite tired," she observed plaintively, "but I simply must go and find Molly." There

was a comfortable armchair by her side, and she looked at it longingly.

I was leaning back at ease in my own chair. "Why not rest for a minute or two?" I suggested.

She poured herself out another cup. "Well, just while I drink this."

I placed the plate containing the tea-cake on a little table between us, and we sat and ate.

"It's lovely sitting here," she observed dreamily, "and I am certain I feel happier."

"So do I."

She turned to me confidentially. "What a pity Molly can't be reasonable."

My eyes were on Milly's face, but a movement of the heavy curtains shrouding the window recess at the far end of the hall attracted my attention. My gaze wandered away from Milly's pretty face and the rose-bud mouth that bit at a tea-cake with little white teeth. I distinctly saw a hand arrange the hangings, with the evident intention of more carefully concealing the inmate from view.

"So Molly isn't likely to be reasonable?" I asked absently.

"Molly is the sweetest, dearest girl in all the

world," replied Milly, "but—she can only see one side at a time."

"And in this case, it is the side not favorable to me?"

"She is very fond of Gilbert," she answered. "I am also very fond of Gilbert, but not ridiculously fond. And, of course, you got him into no end of a scrape. It is not nice to have your allowance cut off."

"But that is all over now," I interposed hastily.

"Molly is angry with you for getting Gilbert into trouble. It may not have been your fault."

"I am afraid it was," I said penitently.

"Well, but you have a defense, you know?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, with a sudden hope; "heaps of defenses."

"That won't make any difference, so far as Molly is concerned," said Milly cruelly. "She only takes in one idea at a time. And the fact of your having got Gilbert into trouble is quite enough to make her go on hating you for ever and ever."

"Oh, heavens!" I exclaimed, with an eye on the curtains, which were twitching uneasily, "surely it is not so bad as all that."

"Molly never changes." Milly rose slowly. "I must go and find her. Will you wait here while I go and fetch her?"

I hesitated a moment. Should I tell Milly that I believed her sister was concealed in the window recess? I decided, on the whole, it would be wiser to go through my first interview with my hostess without spectators; it might prove less trying to my pride. As soon as Milly had disappeared, I tip-toed across the hall, and drew back the curtains. Molly—for it was she, indeed—rose from her seat, her face the color of the sunset.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "I was just going to—look at the—the landscape." I held back the curtains, one in each hand, and began to chatter volubly of summer beauties. Molly was inclosed within the recess, and could only escape by ducking under my arm. She stood perfectly still and looked out of the window. I talked on, not daring to stop, but, at length, I had not a word left to say. So I was silent. She turned as if to go, but I did not drop my arms. She stopped, nonplused.

"Mr. Trewint," she said at length, "will you kindly allow me to pass?"

I stood aside. "I beg your pardon," I murmured, and bowed. At any rate she had spoken to me.

She passed out with great dignity and made straight for the staircase. I followed her.

"Miss Telby," I said, "may I say a single word to you?"

She moved more quickly for a couple of paces, and then stopped and turned coldly towards me.

"I—I saw your brother yesterday." She frowned. I hurried on. "I apologized to him most sincerely." She opened her lips as if to speak, and then closed them. "I want to ask you to tell me what else I can do to show my sincere regret."

She hesitated. "You—you admit, then, that Gilbert did not make a mistake?"

I bowed my head. "Gilbert made no mistake."

"You own," she continued, with a distinct note of triumph in her voice, "that you were the thief?"

I had to think before answering. "I own," I replied at last, "that if there was any thief at all, I was the thief."

My answer puzzled her. "I am afraid I don't quite know what that means," she said. "In any case, have you told father?"

"No," I replied, "I haven't."

"Do you intend to do so?"

"If you wish it."

"Of course I wish it."

"Molly . . . rose from her seat, her face the color of the sunset."

"Gilbert begged me not to."

My answer took her aback. She seemed greatly astonished. "Gilbert begged you not to?" she queried.

I made what I conceived to be an heroic gesture. "I have explained the matter to Gilbert, and he is satisfied. He wants nothing more to be said to your father, for he realizes that he has been partly in error. But what do I care what he wishes, if you desire something different? You have only to say the word and I go to your father this very instant——"

"Oh, no," she cried; "certainly not, if Gilbert doesn't wish it."

"Say but the word," I went on in the same heroic vein, "and I will leave the house this very moment, and trouble you no more with my unwelcome presence. Possibly it will only re-awaken your father's wrath against Gilbert, but if it be your wish——"

"Oh, no," she cried again, "I don't wish that."

"If I am a thief," I said, with exaggerated bitterness, "surely I am not worthy to remain here, even though it be to help your father in his approaching fight."

She did not know what to say or where to look. The teardrops came to her eyes.

"I am not clever," she murmured, very plaintively, "and I don't understand things. I dare say I have been wrong. In fact, I am sure I have, if Gilbert says so." She looked at me with her Madonna-like eyes. "Oh, I hope you won't go away. It will make father so angry."

"I will stay," I answered, "if I may stay as a friend of yours."

The tears rolled down her cheeks. "I am sure," she whispered, "I need a clever friend. Things are so very difficult, and I am never quite sure what to do."

She was very beautiful. "You may always rely on me to help you," I said gently.

"Thank you. And will you help Gilbert, too? I am afraid there is something wrong——"

"In what way?" I asked quickly.

She shook her head. "I cannot tell," she replied. "But since Gilbert has been living in town, he seems so different. I can't help noticing it. He doesn't seem happy."

"You are very fond of Gilbert?"

"Oh, yes, of course." Her face was maternal in its tenderness. "He is the youngest of us, you know. When my mother died, she left him in my charge. And so, of course——"

"I understand," I replied. I held out my hand.

"We are friends, aren't we?"

She smiled. "You and I and Gilbert."

"And Milly."

"Oh, yes, and Milly," she indorsed heartily.

I held her hand. "You forgive me all the pain I have caused you?"

"Oh, yes. And you will forgive me for being —stupid?"

I ventured to raise her hand to my lips. She was very beautiful, and the action was in the vein I had adopted. She blushed, and then started violently. I turned to discover Mr. Telby at the door with his eyes on us. At the same moment Milly came running down the stairs.

That Mr. Telby did not there and then dig me in the ribs is an omission for which I have to be thankful. For his astonishing good humor during the evening the household were undoubtedly grateful, coming as it did after a week of storm. I understood the reason, and it filled me with vague apprehensions of future complications. But when the sun shines it is useless to concern one's self with approaching thunder-clouds. For that evening we basked in the sunshine of Mr. Telby's geniality, tacitly agreeing to make the most of it while it lasted.

CHAPTER X

VICARS' SERMON

THE whole household was nonplused by the remarkable transformation my advent had occasioned in Mr. Telby's temper. The change continued over the evening of my arrival and through breakfast-time next morning, always a critical period. It continued during the forenoon, and, on the strength of it, the under-footman asked for a rise in his wages, and got it. His two daughters, to whom the sudden calm was less explicable than to myself, put it down to my pleasing personality. They told me this, and I smiled ambiguously, hoping they would not be undeceived, for I could hardly explain that their father's good humor was due to the fact that he had caught me kissing his elder daughter's hand.

When I happened to be alone with Mr. Telby and Molly, he would remember engagements with such artless artifice that I was kept continually on thorns. If the two girls and I were together, a servant would be certain to appear and summon Milly away. Now, Molly was certainly very beau-

tiful, but her conversational powers were limited, and after being forced to spend the best part of some days in her company, I began to feel happier at a distance.

It is useless to disguise the fact that the younger sister charmed me mightily, and if I had been allowed to dance attendance on her at my own sweet will, I should thoroughly have enjoyed my stay at Dewhurst. But it was not to be. Molly would sit in state in the drawing room, her hands folded in her lap, her thoughts seemingly miles away, while Milly went busily to and fro on household duties. I would saunter out upon the terrace and smoke innumerable cigarettes, deciding moodily that I was being terribly bored.

"Let us go and play billiards," I suggested one day.

Molly came down from the clouds. "But it is Sunday," she objected.

"So it is," I returned tamely. "I forgot."

"It will be very soon time to get ready for Chapel."

I brightened up. "I shall be quite glad to go to Chapel, or anywhere," I said. "It will be something to do."

We had breakfasted at eight—a ridiculous hour for the Sabbath, and the interval between eight and

eleven was a long one. I looked at my watch, it was hardly ten.

"What time do you start?" I asked.

"About half-past ten."

"Who preaches?"

"Mr. Vicars." Her face took a warmer color, and I imagined a happy little smile played about her lips.

"You are going, I suppose?" I asked.

"Oh, yes." She did not seem anxious to talk. Possibly she was wandering in a happy dreamland with Mr. Vicars.

"Do you like him?" I asked suddenly. She started and reddened, gazing at me with the eyes of a frightened fawn.

"As a preacher, I mean," I added in haste.

"Oh, yes; very much," she answered, in some confusion.

Then we were again silent. But I cherished no further doubt that she was in love with the gaunt parson.

When Mr. Telby came he was dressed in a black frock-coat and trousers.

"Ah, Trewint," he observed, "I suppose you won't be coming to Chapel with us?"

"On the contrary," I returned, "I should like to do so."

"I shall be glad if you will. It will have a good effect." He eyed my tweed clothes.

"I will change at once."

"There's plenty of time. It's barely half an hour's drive. By the way, I suppose you know we're not church folk."

"Oh, yes."

"I have sometimes thought," he said thoughtfully, "of going over to the Established Church. I may yet do it some day. The self-sufficiency of our Nonconformist ministers is intolerable. But, of course, until the election——"

"By the way, I know your minister. We were at Oxford together," I interposed rather abruptly.

He raised his eyebrows. "Indeed!" And then I saw he was thinking how he could turn the fact to his advantage. "Were you at all intimate?"

"No; I can't say we were."

"You would not be. You would not be." He scratched the topmost point of his head delicately with a forefinger. "Vicars," he continued, "is a curious, not to say a difficult, man. I confess he has disappointed me. When he came here, I offered him every hospitality in my power. He came to my house frequently. And then——"

I glanced towards Molly. Her face was

troubled. She rose, and with gentle dignity walked towards the door. Her father waited till it closed upon her.

"And then," he resumed, "he came to me and asked permission to pay his addresses to—to one of my daughters."

"Oh, indeed."

"His salary is exactly four hundred and fifty pounds—four hundred and fifty pounds!"

"Very handsome, indeed," I rejoined, not knowing the line I was expected to take.

"I agree," replied Mr. Telby impressively. "Most handsome. If I may say so without vanity, it would hardly be so much but for my contributions to the funds of the Chapel."

"Really?"

"But surely, Mr. Trewint, my daughters may not unreasonably expect to marry men with larger incomes, or—some equivalent advantage?"

"No doubt."

"Vicars took my refusal badly, very badly. It may turn out to be an unfortunate incident, in view of the election. At the moment, I am entirely ignorant what attitude he will assume."

"I understand he is a great fighter?"

"You are alluding to the last election? I do not wish to use harsh language, but I strongly

deprecate a minister of the Gospel taking part in a purely political contest. It is not his function. I pointed this out to him on the last occasion, but he could not see it."

"All the same," I said, "if he were on our side, I am told, it would be a great help."

Mr. Telby blew his nose. "It would. Considering what I have done for the Chapel, I confess I cannot see how in common decency he can oppose me. Again, his creed is 'men, not measures.' On that score, also, I should command his support."

"He may be with us then?"

"He may," said Mr. Telby hopefully. "It was my intention before another election to get the congregation to pass a resolution forbidding Mr. Vicars to interfere in political matters. I did not then know that Providence would so shortly call on me to stand as a candidate. I have stayed my hand because I felt sure he could only enlist on my side."

"I see."

"I can only say," went on Mr. Telby warmly, "that if he opposes me, it will be gross ingratitude. If he is so ill-advised, my course is clear. I shall leave the Chapel and go elsewhere, or—he must."

As I went to my room to change my clothes,

I could not help realizing that Mr. Telby did not regard the matter from a high standpoint.

At half-past ten punctually the carriage drove to the door, and we took our places. Behind a pair of beautiful bays we bowled smoothly over the road. Milly sat at my side, and my eyes rested on Molly, who sat opposite. What more could man desire? A curious little incident occurred in the course of our drive. In drawing her handkerchief from her pocket, Milly drew out a little three-cornered note, which fell at my feet. I picked it up mechanically and could not help noticing it was addressed to Vicars. I should have returned it to Milly without comment, if I had not noticed that her sister was unaccountably agitated. Almost instinctively I covered the note with my hand. Mr. Telby had been affably bowing to the inmates of a trap passing at the moment, and had not witnessed the incident. As Milly made no movement to reclaim the note, I guessed she did not wish her father to see it, so I slipped it into my pocket, turning to her for approval. She gave a quick nod, and I observed that Molly's color came back.

The Chapel was a large stone building, with no pretensions to architectural beauty. A bill posted on each side of the entrance announced that the

Rev. Mr. Vicars would preach on "The Duty of Electors." In the vestibule black-coated gentlemen were standing, who bowed gravely as we entered. We all returned the bow, and Mr. Telby also shook hands. Then he leading the way, his daughters following, and I in the rear, walked slowly up the tile-paved aisle, almost to the elevated platform which took the place of the pulpit; then, turning to the right, we passed into a cushioned pew against the wall. Mr. Telby stood aside while Milly entered. I went in next, and Molly followed me. Mr. Telby took the corner seat, shutting the pew door with a decisive click.

After taking my seat, I fixed my eye-glass to take a look at my surroundings. I was disconcerted to find that the whole congregation were looking at me. I dropped my eye-glass and opened a hymnbook, not daring to encounter this concentrated gaze. When I had read a hymn through, it occurred to me that Milly might think I was priggish, so I shut the book and turned to glean encouragement from her. She merely pushed various books of devotion towards me, which I meekly accepted.

In a few minutes Mr. Vicars ascended the platform. He gave out a hymn, which was sung

heartily to the accompaniment of an excellent organ, played so loudly that it caused the congregation to shout. A prayer followed, which impressed me by its extreme fervor and by the potency of its imagery. For the first time, I appreciated the fact that extemporaneous prayer from the mouth of a capable man is one of the strong points of the Nonconformist mode of worship. Then the Scriptures were read, too dramatically, it seemed to me, though I must admit that I am no judge. Mr. Vicars read as a trained actor might, making the most of every phrase. This may be a merit, though I do not think so.

When he anounced as his theme the subject stated on the bills at the chapel door, the congregation rustled gently, and settled down to listen. He commenced by defending the right of the pulpit to deal with secular matters, and defended it very ably, though it seemed to me that his argument was based on a fallacy. He assumed that every controversial question has only two alternative solutions,—a right one and a wrong one. Assuming this, and it means assuming a good deal, it is plainly the duty of a Christian minister to use his influence in favor of the righteous solution.

Having demonstrated this to his satisfaction, he went off at a tangent, and argued that a righteous

electorate must not, under any circumstances, vote for an unrighteous man.

He then entered upon a careful disquisition as to what "righteousness" meant. Having explained at considerable length what the term inferred—and it seemed to be little less than absolute perfection—he admitted that the electorate could not see into the candidates' hearts. This being so, they must judge by their acts. The preacher implied that it was the duty of every elector to conduct a microscopic inquiry into the candidates' past careers. They were not to be led away by riches. They were not to be seduced by the glamour of great names. (Here some of the congregation eyed me rather sternly.) Their duty was not to men, but to Heaven, whose cause they advanced by the choice of a suitable candidate.

Having laid down these general principles, he stated he would not apply them to the particular problem which was that day confronting his hearers. Each man must solve it for himself. I glanced at Mr. Telby, and saw that his face betokened disappointment. During the preliminary remarks of the preacher, his face had beamed with modest self-complacency. I saw that he felt assured he squared exactly with the definition of a "righteous candidate." It had evidently not oc-

curred to him that the preacher might hold a different opinion. Evidently he expected to be crowned as "righteous" before the whole congregation; but he was shortly to suffer a severe disillusionment.

Mr. Vicars, having remarked that each man must make his own application of the general principles which he had laid down, immediately began to apply them in terms that were not even slightly ambiguous. "Suppose," he said, "one of the two candidates was a large employer of labor, and it was common knowledge that he treated his employees with harshness, sending helpless women and children to the workhouse and unhappy men to prison, would that be righteous? Certainly not. Would they be justified in voting for such a man? By no means."

The eyes of the whole congregation were now riveted on Mr. Telby, whose face was aflame. The allusion was obvious, though hardly a fair one. A few months previously there had been a lock-out at Mr. Telby's works. The difficulty was in reference to the employment of non-unionists, whose cause Mr. Telby had supported with success. There had been some cases of intimidation, and, under a recent Act, Mr. Telby had prosecuted, with the result that one or two workmen had been

sent to prison. No doubt, too, there had been instances of privation. There are few labor disputes which do not bring want in their train.

The charge of oppression might have passed muster on a political platform, for no one expects absolute fairness in the rough-and-tumble of a Parliamentary contest, but to use the pulpit for a charge of this nature, to which plainly there was another side, while the unhappy victim sat tongue-tied below, was surely an outrage. Mr. Vicars, however, had worked himself into a passion, and, discarding all notes, was preaching extemporaneously, carried away by his own eloquence. It was to be my turn next.

"Suppose," he went on, "one of the two candidates, knowing that there was a family in the neighborhood whose name, rightly or wrongly, was held in high honor, having failed to get the assistance of the reputable head of that family, and desirous of influencing unthinking people, was to obtain the services of another member of the same family, well knowing him to be a foolish, vain, immoral trifler, who saw not nor cared for the seriousness of life, who lived for himself alone, who laughed at the earnest and mocked at the holy, would that be the act of a righteous man? Should a candidate who was content to use such a tool

receive the suffrages of a sincere and honest electorate?"

I listened to this tirade with intense astonishment. His criticisms certainly did not square with my conceptions of my own conduct or character. It was a new view, and, naturally, interesting. I looked up to him on the platform, as with impassioned face and blazing eyes he poured out his flood of rhetoric, and shook his clenched fist in our direction. I stole a glance at Milly; she was staring at the desk in front of her, her lips pressed together, and her brow furrowed with a frown.

At that moment Mr. Telby created a diversion by diving for his hat.

"I am going out," he said in an audible whisper. "I refuse to listen to any more rant. The man is mad. You must all come with me."

So saying, he rose, opened the door of the pew, and, bristling with indignation and breathing heavily, passed down the aisle. The heads of the congregation turned simultaneously towards him as he passed, and the spontaneous movement gave the impression of a zephyr rippling over a field of corn. The preacher continued his harangue without pausing.

I made no move to follow Mr. Telby, deciding

that, even if the provocation were double, I would prefer to bear it rather than walk down that long aisle. The two girls also sat still. Molly looked white and agitated, and watched Vicars with a perplexed expression as if she hardly comprehended the situation. No sooner had the green baize doors of the Chapel closed on Mr. Telby than Mr. Vicars seemed to lose the thread of his discourse; he stammered, grew slightly incoherent, and then, with an obvious effort, concluded his sermon without further personal allusions. I think most people breathed a sigh of relief when he gave out the closing hymn.

While the congregation labored through it, Mr. Vicars sat with his hands covering his face. When the hymn was ended he uttered the Benediction, and immediately left the pulpit.

As I collected my hat, stick, and gloves, I ventured to glance at Milly. She met my look without speaking.

"I expect father is waiting for us outside," said Molly. "Oughtn't we to hurry out?"

"No, no; let the crowd clear away first," I returned hastily. I was anxious to avoid discussing the incident with strangers.

Milly still frowned thoughtfully. The congregation filed out slowly, casting curious glances

in our direction. For my part, I took some pains to appear cheerful and unconcerned.

Just as we were rising to leave, the Chapel attendant aproached me.

"Mr. Vicars," he said, with an air of some mystery, "will be greatly obliged if you will step into the vestry for a minute."

I hesitated, and turned, naturally enough, to Milly.

"Shall I go?" I asked her. "What do you think?"

She did not answer for a moment. "Please go," she replied at length. "He may wish to—to explain."

So I followed the man into a small inner room, in which I found Mr. Vicars sitting. He was pale and seemed weary, and I noticed his hands trembled.

He half rose. "I shall not detain you more than a minute, Mr. Trewint," he began. "I am indebted to you for your courtesy in coming here at my request."

"On the contrary," I said, "I am glad to have an opportunity of congratulating you on your admirable sermon."

He was silent. "I sent for you," he resumed at length, "because I realize I have been untrue to a

great trust. I made an attack on you this morning from motives which were not pure. My personal feelings overcame me. I was angry, jealous, sick at heart, and I allowed myself to be carried away. When I entered the pulpit I had no intention of attacking you. But the words came, and I did not stop to think. As soon as they were uttered, I knew they were prompted by motives which were unworthy."

I softened at once. "Of course, Mr. Vicars," I said, "we are all liable to be carried off our feet by our feelings. And some people do take politics so very seriously. But please say nothing more. I am quite willing to accept your frank explanation."

He made no immediate reply, but stared gloomily in front of him. So I gave him a friendly nod, and was preparing to leave the room, when he stopped me.

"Pray understand," he said stiffly, "that I do not withdraw a single word. Everything I have said it was my duty to say."

"Bless my soul," I exclaimed, "I thought you had just apologized!"

"I hardly expect you to understand me," he returned. "But all I have said to-day I was justified in saying; nay, more, bound to say. The more

I consider it, the more I feel that I was performing a duty. But," he raised his eyes to the ceiling, "may Heaven forgive me, I spoke not because it was my duty to speak, but because I was swayed by personal enmity."

"This is quite enigmatical," I observed.

"I can well understand," he replied, "that anything that does not float on the surface of a man's soul is an enigma to you."

I ignored his observation, possibly because I had no answer ready. "If I remember rightly," I said, "you stated I was immoral; the other epithets may pass. Do you usually hurl such accusations from the pulpit at political opponents of whose character and private life you must of necessity be absolutely ignorant?"

"I am not ignorant of your private life nor of your character," he answered. "I could not know them more completely if they were written out on paper."

"Have you proof?"

"Yes; I have proof."

"Produce it."

"If necessary I will produce it, but not now."

"This is hardly satisfactory," I said. "You sent for me to tell me you believe every word you

uttered, and in the same breath that your motives were not pure."

"That is so."

"What were your motives? I have hardly the pleasure of your acquaintance. Why do you feel enmity towards me?"

He flushed. "If you ask me," he answered slowly, "I must tell you. We are competitors for the hand of the same lady; I without hope, you with every prospect of success."

I looked at him with sudden enlightenment. "I think you go too far in saying I am a competitor for any lady's hand," I returned. "And, in any case, how do you know?"

"I have it from Mr. Telby himself," he replied.

I regarded him perplexedly. It was rather an awkward position. It was more than probable Mr. Telby had made some foolish assertion of the kind. "I really don't think we can discuss the matter longer with advantage," I responded at last. "As I understand it, you persist in the charges you made against me this morning. You have also relieved your conscience by confessing you made them from unworthy motives. By a lucky coincidence it appears that the promptings of malice and of duty alike required you to make them. This must be a matter of great satisfaction to you."

My hand was on the door-knob, when I remembered the note I had picked up. "By the way, I have a letter for you. Here it is."

I left the room and joined the two girls. We found that Mr. Telby had obtained a trap from the "Swan" and had driven home. I was silent as to what had passed during my interview with Vicars.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRIG AND THE WORLDLING

THROUGHOUT the midday meal at Dewhurst Mr. Telby boiled and bubbled, while his two daughters sat constrained and nervous. I did my best to minimize the whole affair, affecting to regard it as a huge joke. I even went out of my way to offer some kind of apology for the parson, thereby earning a gentle glance from Molly, though Milly did not relax her thoughtful frown.

"He has declared himself against me," moaned Mr. Telby. "We must count on his antagonism."

"He is entitled to his opinions," I ventured.

"But he is not entitled to abuse me from the pulpit," boomed Mr. Telby. "Has he no gratitude, no sense of decency? Can he have forgoten all I have done for the Chapel?"

"Don't you think," I suggested, "that his attack on you may disgust some of his own party?"

But this view did not comfort Mr. Telby.

"I start this campaign," he said, "branded as

a cruel taskmaster, whose chief supporter is a vain, frivolous, immoral worldling. I beg your pardon, but that is how it will be put. It will do much to alienate Nonconformist support. And without that support, I cannot possibly win the election."

"It is most unfortunate," I replied soothingly.

For the first time Mr. Telby looked at me with critical eyes. I could easily follow his train of thought. He was wondering whether I was a gain or a handicap. It was a matter of indifference whether I was in fact vain, frivolous, and immoral. The question was—should I attract or alienate votes?

"It is a pity your brother cannot give his personal assistance," he observed.

Milly gave me a quick glance. She, too, appreciated the unflattering inference.

"A great pity," I echoed, determined not to let the man make me angry. "As you are aware, I came here reluctantly. If you imagine that a moral wreck like myself can only do you harm, I am willing to leave by this evening's train."

"My dear sir," he protested. But he was evidently still doing a little sum in his head. For some minutes he was engrossed in his own meditations, and, leaving him to them, I turned to Milly.

"I hope you don't think me too wicked to be talked to," I asked in a low voice.

She smiled with an effort. "Oh, no."

"Everyone here seems to believe the worst of his neighbors," I went on. "No one cares about proof. I hope your magistrates don't convict on these principles, or that your prisons are commodious."

She smiled again in a pained way. "What did you do with that note?" she whispered suddenly.

"I gave it to——"

She nodded quickly, intercepting the last word. "Thank you."

Mr. Telby, having considered the pros and cons, had evidently decided in my favor, for his cordiality came back with a rush. He beamed on me.

"I shall win yet," he said confidently, "with your help. We will show that young upstart that his crew doesn't count for much in Trewint. After all, the Chapel folk will probably vote Radical in any case. I shall certainly join the Established Church after this."

That was not a point on which I was qualified to offer advice. "Let me see," I said, "our first meeting is on Tuesday."

Mr. Telby nodded. "The other side have booked the Corn Exchange for Monday. It will be interesting to know what Vicars and his gang say. They'll have my address to consider; they won't get much change out of that."

I thought of the verbose document with some dread. It seemed to me to offer plenty of scope for attack.

"Perhaps not," I replied cautiously.

"By the way, can you attend a Committee meeting to-morrow in the town?"

"Oh, certainly; my time is yours."

"And what are you young people going to do this afternoon?" he asked, turning genially to his daughters. "Of course, Milly, you will not go to the Sunday school after what has happened to-day."

"Very well, father," replied his younger daughter, with meekness.

Mr. Telby rose from his chair. "I think, Molly, you might show Mr. Trewint the ruins."

There was a distressing silence for a moment. "I—I have a headache, father," said Molly.

Her father frowned ominously. Milly intervened quickly. "If Mr. Trewint will accept me as a substitute——"

"I shall be delighted," I replied, with heartiness.

Mr. Telby did not seem satisfied, but he could say nothing, and retired to his study, while Milly and I prepared for our walk.

When she was ready she joined me in the garden. Leaving the house on our left, we passed through the park and emerged into a country lane. Crossing this, we followed a little pathway leading through a plantation.

"This is the shortest way," said Milly. "I hope you don't expect to see anything very wonderful. It is only an old abbey."

"Old abbeys are most interesting."

"Well, this one isn't. Most of it has been cleared away to build workmen's cottages, and the part that remains has resolved itself into a heap of stones."

"But there are some rather nice wild strawberries there," I said, "and they should be ripe."

Milly stared. "How did you know that?" And then she gave a little laugh. "Of course, this is your ancestral home. I shouldn't be surprised if the abbey belongs to your brother."

"I believe it does."

She flushed slightly. "It was rather silly of us to offer to show you something you know ever so much better than we do. But for the moment I quite forgot, and I suppose father did so too.

Instead of going to the abbey, let us walk through Dunmore Glen—it is so pretty."

"Very well," I assented; and we turned off to the right.

"It's your own fault," she went on. "Why is it you never come to Trewint? It is difficult to associate you with the place."

"Well, you know," I explained, "before my brother married, Trewint Hall was mostly shut up. A single man doesn't want to live in a great barrack of a place. But I dare say things will be different now."

"I suppose Lady Trewint is very charming."

"Oh, very."

We strolled along silently. I was the first to speak.

"I have been wondering what you think about that unfortunate affair this morning. I can't make out with whom your sympathies are—with Mr. Vicars or with me."

"I don't think it matters much with whom I sympathize," she replied.

"Ah, I am not sure of that."

"I greatly esteem Mr. Vicars."

"To the extent of acquiescing in all he says or does?"

"No, certainly not." She spoke with emphasis.

"Tell me," I said, "what you really think of Mr. Vicars?"

She looked at me with directness. "Why should I do that? Mr. Vicars is a friend of some years' standing. You——"

"Of days only. But still, a friend."

She did not speak for some moments. "I can't understand," she returned thoughtfully, "why Mr. Vicars spoke of you as he did. About father, he only repeated what some of the papers said at the time, but I don't think he ought to have brought it into his sermon."

"People are always doing wrong and stupid things from a mistaken sense of duty," I suggested.

"Was that how he explained it to you in the vestry?"

"He did not allude to his remarks about your father. He told me that he was certain every word he had said of me was true, and that it was his duty to say it, but that it was also his duty to confess that he had spoken from improper motives, from a feeling of personal enmity."

"It seems very subtle." And then, to my surprise, she gave a little laugh. "Oh, yes; it is so like poor, dear Mr. Vicars. He is always analyzing and dissecting his motives until sometimes

he doesn't know whether he is a serpent or a dove."

"I don't think he has a very robust mind," I hinted.

"He is very conscientious, and earnest, and devout," said Milly. "But, at the same time, he certainly does things which are not—well, not quite honorable."

"In what way?"

"Well, you know he is in love with Molly. I'm their go-between—I and Bob, the porter."

I turned and looked at her with astonishment. Milly flushed, and, averting her eyes, continued more rapidly.

"That letter this morning was from Molly. I always take a letter from Molly every Sunday, because I usually have to see Mr. Vicars about the Chapel work, or something. On Wednesday, when Robert comes over to see Mary, the housemaid, he brings a reply, which he slips into the toolbag of my bicycle."

I could not keep my countenance. "This is really very wrong," I said reprovingly.

"I know it is; and, of course, I am as bad as he is. But what I can't understand is that so good a man as Mr. Vicars should stoop to such a deception. I have told you all this because I know you

will not tell father. But if you were in Mr. Vicars' place, and he was in yours, I should not tell you. Why is that?"

"I am sure I don't know."

"Because I should be afraid that you would tell father. This is terribly confused. But what I mean is, that Mr. Vicars, though very good and religious, hasn't got that sense of honor which a gentleman is supposed to have."

"A man's sense of honor," I explained, "is only another name for the force of public opinion prevailing in the circle to which he belongs. That is why Mr. Vicars probably thinks many things I do disgraceful, while possibly he does without a qualm other things that I could never bring myself to do."

"But surely there is a 'right' and a 'wrong'?"

"Oh, most certainly. There is the bedrock of right and wrong, but few of us manage to reach down to it."

"I don't see," said Milly, "what you are driving at."

"You were alleging that Mr. Vicars' sense of honor was deficient. I was only finding an excuse for him, and, at the same time, an excuse for myself."

"If I understand you, the excuse for both of you is that you are only types of your class."

"Well, are we not?"

Milly thought for a moment. "Was he justified in using the words he did about you?"

"I am not sure that he was justified, but I dare say there is some truth in what he says."

"Then," said she promptly, "you are dissipated?"

That was more than I was prepared to admit to Miss Milly. "The word may mean something wicked, or it may only mean something foolish. I plead guilty only to the lesser count," I answered cautiously.

Milly sighed. "I wish you didn't waste your life. It seems wrong."

We walked along in silence for a little while. "I have confessed a few of my defects," I said; "now, oughtn't you to tell me some of yours?"

She roused herself. "Well, I don't mind. Gilbert knows one, and I suspect Molly does too, only I don't suppose she puts it in words."

"Well," I asked; "what is it?"

She blushed deeply. "I—I am rather a—prig."

I laughed so loudly that the birds fluttered in the branches of a neighboring tree in protest.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "And however did you find it out?"

"Gilbert told me first," she said, with downcast eyes. "He had got into debt, and he asked me to lend him some money. Instead of doing so I lectured him, advised him to tell father everything. That was priggish, wasn't it?"

"It was rather," I admitted.

"So he told me I was a prig, and proved it by ever so many other instances that I couldn't help recognizing that it was true."

"Well," I said, "a fault confessed——"

"Oh, I know, I know," she cried hastily. "But the worst of it is, from fear of being thought priggish, I do lots of things I oughtn't. I send Gilbert part of the housekeeping money, which is really almost stealing from father; and then I oughtn't to act as a go-between for Molly and Mr. Vicars." She sighed heavily. "You have no idea how difficult things are."

"Never mind," I said consolingly. "Let's hope everything will come right by and by. And if you agree not to think me the very worst kind of worldling, I'll agree not to think you the very worst kind of prig. Is that a bargain?"

"Very well," she agreed. "Only you mustn't think I approve of your wasting your life. Is that a priggish remark?" she cried in sudden alarm.

"Oh, no," I said.

"I am afraid it is," she replied mournfully. "However, as it is getting near tea-time, the prig and the worldling had better be getting home."

"Will the prig take the worldling's arm?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Will it be priggish of the prig to refuse?"

"Oh, very," I said.

"Well, as there is no one about, the prig will not be priggish on this occasion."

CHAPTER XII

TREFUSIS AGAIN

I DROVE over to Trewint the next day to attend the Committee meeting at the Conservative Club. When we arrived we found the rest of the Committee already assembled—twenty-two in all, of whom about two-thirds belonged to the tradesman and farmer class, while the other third consisted of professional men, with a sprinkling of representatives of county families. The former class were ill at ease and self-conscious; the professional gentlemen were very affable and bland; while the county aristocrats maintained great dignity, and talked to each other.

When Mr. Telby entered the room he made at once for the latter group, holding me by the arm, and insisting on introducing me to men I had known from childhood. Having performed this unnecessary task with great unction, he mentioned the names of the professional gentlemen in a string, and, with a wave of his hand, included them in

one summary introduction. He ignored the other members of the Committee completely, which I thought not only bad manners, but undiplomatic. To repair his omission, I approached the group in ill-fitting black coats and shook hands cordially, chatting about the weather and crops for nearly fifteen minutes. I mention this, because I heard afterwards that this little act of mine saved me from an unpleasant episode. It seems that the minds of some of these gentlemen had been much disturbed by Mr. Vicars' attack on my moral character, and they had come to the meeting with the intention of proposing that I should not participate in the contest. The greengrocer, Mr. Lobster by name, who was esteemed to possess great tact, had been deputed to make the suggestion. However, I was spared this awkwardness, for Mr. Lobster was so touched by my tender inquiries for his wife (whom I remembered because of her inordinate stoutness), that he became one of my keenest champions in days following.

The details of that Committee meeting I do not propose to relate here. There was a certain amount of business done, allotting canvassing districts and so forth, and there was an immense amount of talk. Farmer Greenhow couldn't understand why Mr. Telby did not support a tax on

corn, which the farmer knew on certain evidence would secure him at least ten votes. Mr. Watson, a grocer and vendor of bottled beer, utterly dissented from Mr. Telby's views on Temperance Reform and other "sich rot." Altogether, as chairman, I had my work cut out to keep things going smoothly. The method I adopted, with success, was to listen with concentrated attention to each suggestion, nodding my head at frequent intervals to show my appreciation of the wisdom of the speaker, and then to make a note on a piece of paper before me. If there arose a possibility of a real conflict of opinion, I would turn with eagerness to someone who had not expressed his view and ask, with earnestness, "And what do you think, Mr. So-and-so?" Mr. So-and-so would be greatly flattered, but, being unprepared, would make some incoherent remarks, which fogged the issue, and the danger would pass.

When the meeting was at an end, Mr. Telby escorted the county notabilities to the door with too profuse courtesy. The professional gentlemen took themselves off at the same time, but the others, whose interest in the election seemed keener, remained talking and arguing in groups. Mr. Telby, returning from seeing our only baronet to his carriage, seized me by the arm, and with a curt

nod in the direction of the lingering members of the Committee, propelled me towards the door.

"Let's go home," he said. "There's nothing else we need bother about to-day."

It seemed so rude to break away in this abrupt fashion from men who, whatever their social standing, were working in our interest, that I disengaged myself from his grasp and again shook hands all round. Mr. Telby awaited me impatiently. The door had hardly closed on us when he turned to me.

"It's a waste of time being polite to these chaps," he said. "I own their shops."

Just as we were leaving the building he stumbled against a man passing.

"Confound you, sir!" he exclaimed. The man turned. It was Trefusis.

Mr. Telby held out his hand. "Didn't know it was you," he said. "And here's a friend of yours." He indicated me.

Trefusis' eye met mine, and he smiled blithely.

"Funny to meet in this dismal little hole, isn't it?" he observed genially.

"I suppose you've come to canvass on my behalf," said Mr. Telby jocosely.

"Hardly. In fact——"

"Well, you'll dine with us this evening? Only Trewint and the two girls."

"It's very good of you." He hesitated, and I wondered whether he would have the effrontery to accept the invitation.

"A quarter to eight," called out Mr. Telby as he climbed into his carriage. "By the way, where are you staying?"

"Oh, I am staying with an old college friend, a parson. In fact, I've promised to help him at the election."

Mr. Telby's face changed suddenly. "Not—not that blackguard——"

Trefusis' eye traveled to mine with ill-concealed amusement.

"Oh, no; not a blackguard. A most estimable man. His name is Vicars."

"Pshaw!" cried Mr. Telby with disgust. "I can't understand how any self-respecting man can associate with a—a——" His feelings were too deep for words. "And I remember we are not dining at home this evening. James, drive on."

During the drive he kept up a running tirade of abuse against Vicars. But I hardly heeded him. Here was a curiously unexpected development. Trefusis had come down to Trewint to assist Vicars! Why? And could Trefusis do our side any harm? It seemed improbable, except in so far as he could discredit me. Could he discredit me?

I remembered Vicars' words in the pulpit and in the vestry the day before. Were his vague allegations of profligacy prompted by Trefusis? Perhaps this was his revenge. If so, what a very dirty business! I cast my eye over my past with a sudden nervousness. I could find nothing very dreadful there—nothing which the average man would not find.

Yes, that was no doubt the case, but the average man—— I had pursued this line of thought for some weeks before, and had dropped off to sleep convinced that my armor of defense was invulnerable. But now Milly kept springing up before my mental vision. She was a new factor in the case. The arguments that had consoled me had to be looked at again from another point of view. I was the average man. She was, let it be assumed, the average woman. Would the private life of an average man shock the delicate sense of an average woman? I groaned inwardly.

At Dewhurst I found a letter awaiting me from my sister-in-law. Here is an extract: "Good news travels fast. I hear you are making very satisfactory progress with what, to my mind, is so much more important than that stupid election —the cultivation of the gentle Molly. Persevere, my dearest Fred. I would *love* to see you settled.

And Gerald is ever so keen it should happen. Do you know he was told by a friend, who had it from a man who is intimately acquainted with Mr. Telby's affairs, that he is worth——"

I put the letter in the fire. Bother Molly! But I dressed quickly, and was in the drawing room before the dressing-bell rang, on the chance that her younger sister might just possibly be early too; which, as it happened, she was.

CHAPTER XIII

FIRST BLOOD

WHEN I came down to breakfast the next morning the sudden silence as I entered the room betokened that I was the subject of conversation. Around Mr. Telby's chair there was a litter of newspapers. A sheet was propped up in front of him, and over it his red, angry face glowered like the sun through a fog.

"Good-morning," I said. "Any news?"

He struggled for words. "He's gone too far this time," he managed to say at length.

I indicated to the servant my preference for bacon and kidneys. "Who has?" I asked.

"That—that——" As he did not complete his sentence I knew he wished to refer to Vicars.

"What has he been up to?" Milly poured me out some tea, and Molly passed the cup. I felt aggrieved, and in no way interested in Mr. Telby's complaints, for Milly had not articulately wished me "good-morning." "We'll go and call

on Jenkins," said Mr. Telby. "He'll know how to put a stopper on this fellow."

"Who is Jenkins?"

"My solicitor. A criminal prosecution ought to put an end to these slanders."

"Has Vicars been at it again?" I asked, rather indifferently.

"At it again!" echoed Mr. Telby. "Just you read the report of his speech last night in the *Central Chronicle*. We'll go for the editor, too. We'll put the whole confounded crew in jail! We'll show that we're not to be trifled with!"

"What has he said?" I asked, with awakening curiosity.

"Said? He says you are a confirmed drunkard!"

The kidney on my fork stopped on its way to my mouth. I looked at Mr. Telby and then at Milly.

"What a funny thing to say!" I observed at length.

"Mr. Vicars didn't quite say that, father," interposed Milly. "He only said that once or twice Mr. Trewint was——"

"Read the infernal thing for yourself," roared Mr. Telby, pushing the newspaper towards me.

I took the paper, and halfway down a column

headed "Liberal Meeting at Trewint," I read: "The Rev. Mr. Vicars, who was received with cheers, said that he felt their present position to be one of heavy responsibility. They were concerned in an election, and, as citizens, it was incumbent on them, not only to return a worthy representative, but to see that a high standard of electoral purity was maintained. The cynical fashion in which the Tories were carrying on the campaign must meet with the reprobation of all honest men. What did they see? Mr. Telby alleged himself to be a temperance reformer. He was the president of the Trewint Temperance League, and had, at the initial meeting, placed his name in the pledge book. Those of them present would recall his speech on that occasion. And whom had he chosen for his chief supporter? A man with an honored name. (Cheers.) They cheered, but what was an honored name alienated from an honorable life? (Loud cheers.) Was this chief supporter of Mr. Telby a temperance reformer? They knew he was not. He was revealing no secret when he stated that the individual in question had on more than one occasion been fined for drunkenness—for being drunk in public places. This was the man Mr. Telby chose as his chief supporter. How dared he insult their wives and daughters by bringing

such a man into their midst? He trusted they would show by their votes that they resented such conduct."

I laid down the paper and looked at Milly. Her eyes were turned away, but they came round to mine almost reluctantly, and I noticed with a thrill that they were full of tears.

"Well?" said Mr. Telby.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well?"

"What do you propose to do?"

"I don't propose to do anything," I answered, continuing my breakfast.

"You don't propose to do anything!" repeated Mr. Telby. "Oh, yes, you do! You're going to prosecute him—to make a public example of him."

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

I did not answer for a moment. "On the whole," said I, "the best course is to let the matter slide."

He glared at me. "Not even deny it?"

"No." I spoke, perhaps, more decidedly than usual, for Mr. Telby stopped short, poised, as it were, in mid air.

"To take no notice!" he ejaculated. "Good heavens, what will people think!"

"Oh, well," I said, "I don't mean that I shan't

perhaps allude to it at one of our meetings, but I only propose to rely on words."

"What an opportunity to throw away!" he groaned. "You will give the impression it is true."

"It can't be helped."

"I could almost believe you have been fined for drunkenness," he cried, with sudden exasperation.

"So I have."

When a footman, trained to immobility, gives a short, quick gasp and drops a plate, you may be sure his feelings are powerfully moved. And if a menial, who is only remotely interested, betrays strong emotion, what must be the sensations of his master, who is directly concerned? Mr. Telby was silent—suddenly, blankly silent—the quiescence of complete prostration.

I looked towards Milly. She gazed at me with an expression of absolute terror. Molly and I continued our breakfast.

It was some minutes before Mr. Telby spoke. "You have been fined for drunkenness!" he whispered.

"At least twice," I replied cheerfully.

"Twice?" he moaned. "Twice?"

"Twenty shillings on each occasion. And very moderate, considering."

"You do not appreciate the gravity of the situation," he said, choking. "It will lose me the whole of the temperance vote. I consider," he burst forth, with sudden fury, "that you should have warned me."

"Warned you of my unhappy propensity?" I asked politely.

"Warned me you had publicly disgraced yourself," he fumed. He rose, and strode about the room. "What am I to do?" he cried. "See in what a position you have placed me!"

"But you didn't know."

"I know now."

"Then throw me over. Send me back to London by the next train. I will go."

"But then I shall lose the Trewint vote," he wailed; and if he had not been a short, stout man, naturally sparing of gesture, I think he would have wrung his hands. His eyes traveled to Molly, and then they rested on me. "No," he said decisively, "we must make the best of it. We must explain it away. Possibly,"—hope beamed in his eyes,—"you were then very young?"

"Well, yes," I acknowledged; "I was young."

"And you repent; you deeply repent?"

"Oh, hang it, no! It was tremendous fun."

He groaned. I could see he was suffering

"'You do not appreciate the gravity of the situation,' he said."

acutely. Then another thought flashed through his brain. "Young men of spirit, old heads not for young shoulders, not responsible, years of discretion," I heard him mutter. He felt in his waistcoat pocket for a pencil, and, not finding one, searched behind the clock, and, balked again, hastened out of the room with the evident intention of making a note.

The breakfast room opened into the garden, and the fragrance of summer filled the air. Milly had risen from the table.

"Let us go into the garden," I suggested.

She shook her head.

"Oh, please come."

Molly was still at breakfast. She had a hearty appetite.

"You might go and pick the flowers," she said to her sister.

"I—must see the cock," said Milly hurriedly.

"*P*," I observed. Milly gave me a startled look.

"You'd better do the flowers first," said Molly, taking a piece of toast.

"Oh, no, I must——"

"*R*," I remarked.

Again she started. She took up a bundle of keys and jangled it.

"I really must attend to my household duties," she said firmly.

"*I*," I continued.

"Oh, oh, I'll come." She gave a little run and was out in the garden, the sunlight on her hair. I followed more leisurely. As I approached her, she hurried on across the lawn to the flower beds.

"Have you nothing to say to me?" I asked from behind. "No reproaches; no nothing?"

She turned suddenly, and for the second time that morning I saw tears flood her eyes.

"You make light of everything," she said. "But I—I cannot make light of everything."

"You are angry with me."

"I am—disappointed."

"Have I not always disappointed you?" I asked dejectedly.

She was silent for a time, and then she looked up. "You—you never had a mother," she said softly, and there was maternal solicitude in her voice.

"You are trying to find an excuse for me," I returned. "What a kind little heart you have. But it is no good! I did have a mother; it was quite necessary."

She wheeled away angrily. "You—you make it very hard for me to talk seriously."

"And so I do," I assented, ashamed.

She began to snip off flowers with a pair of scissors that hung at her waist. I produced a cigarette.

"Drunkenness," said I, "is not a romantic failing."

She flashed an indignant glance at me over her shoulder.

"Once," I continued, "you thought me a burglar, and you were quite right. I have many little failings. Now you think me a drunkard. And why? Because twice, in a long and checkered career, I have taken more than was good for me. Only twice!"

"In public places! Oh, the shame of it!"

"I did not drink in public places, though I admit I exhibited myself afterwards—I have no real modesty—in my college quadrangle. It was after a bump supper. We were all rather—well, merry. And we made a lovely bonfire."

"Oh, all this happened at college?" she exclaimed, seemingly relieved.

"That makes no difference," I retorted severely. "Pray do not try and comfort me by false distinctions. The British workingman, reeling

home to batter his wife; the undergraduate, celebrating his college's victory; both are equally to blame, for both are equally intoxicated."

"I suppose you were fined by a don or a proctor —or whatever you call him?"

"And that," I rejoined, "is as disgraceful in principle as if the fine was inflicted by a stipendiary magistrate."

"There seems to be a difference," she observed, "and, in any case, you were only a boy."

Her arms were full of flowers. She smiled over them.

"I cannot see the distinction," I replied.

"It was very wrong of you to mislead papa," said she. She moved towards the house, but stopped for a moment to look back. "I am glad you didn't spell the whole word."

CHAPTER XIV

OUR FIRST MEETING

TREWINT was becoming infected with the excitement of the approaching contest. The walls and windows were covered with colored posters, and the more enthusiastic of the populace had already adorned themselves with rosettes. Our first meeting was certainly enthusiastic. When the Dewhurst party, consisting of Mr. Telby, the two girls, and myself, ascended the platform, we were cheered again and again. Then someone called for "groans for Vicars," and the howling was indescribable.

The meeting had not progressed far before it became apparent that the audience regarded the vulgar episode in which Mr. Vicars and I figured as the important feature of the election. When I rose someone in the gallery lowered a sheet with some of my scores in county cricket inscribed thereon, and the cheering again became tremendous. It became obvious that the hall was full of what might be called the Trewint "sporting"

element—young men from shops and factories, not one in six probably possessing a vote—all of whom seemed to regard me as a kind of local hero. They were a rowdy crew, and I admit that at first I was by way of feeling ashamed. But their vociferous cheers were like incense to Mr. Telby. He sat and beamed and bowed, the picture of rubicund content. In a little time I, too, was swayed by that curious influence which binds an assembly together, and I began to regard myself as no small figure in no small movement.

I had intended, as I had hinted to Mr. Telby, to try and get a "little of my own" back at this meeting. I had prepared many bitter and sarcastic things to say about Mr. Vicars, most of which, on mature reflection, I had rejected. But in the excitement of the moment I let myself go. Certainly my speech was a success. It was cheered to the echo. Every "score" I made received its meed of applause. If it is the chief aim of a speaker to obtain the approbation of his audience, then I achieved my object. If, on the other hand, it is his duty to say nothing of which he will be ashamed in calmer moments, then, emphatically, I failed. It will serve no end to set down my quips and cranks at Mr. Vicars' expense. They were cheap enough, Heaven knows, or they would not

have won the applause of the rabble I was addressing.

As I neared a triumphant close, I happened to turn and catch a glimpse of Molly's face. Her eyes were fixed on me, and there was a piteous, hunted look in them which gave me pause. In that brief glance I noticed that Milly held her sister's hand, and was gently smoothing it between her own, and that on her face there was something like scorn. I hesitated for a moment, and then, pulling myself together, finished my speech in an entirely different key. My final words were almost a rhapsody on Mr. Vicars' virtues. I reminded my audience, who did not applaud, of the work he had done amongst them, how he had fought against the smallpox epidemic a few years before, and how his life had been devoted to the succor of the poor and needy. "I think," I concluded, "that he has treated me badly, and I, too, have spared no hard words in speaking of him. But I expect that he and I both realize that much which is said at election times is forgotten as soon as the poll is declared. I know that not one in this hall has really forgotten his sterling worth, and I hope when the contest is at an end, whatever may be the result, I shall be privileged to meet as a friend a man whom I esteem."

I sat down amid considerable, though not tumultuous, applause. My last words had proved somewhat of a cold-water douche to the enthusiastic exuberance of the meeting. But I did not care; a glance at Molly's face showed a brighter color on her cheek, and Milly had flashed me a glance which I interpreted as approval.

When Mr. Telby rose, his first few words, in which he dissociated himself from what he termed "the magnanimous conclusion of my eloquent speech," were received with favor. But no sooner did he leave the topic which alone interested his audience, and devote himself to the political questions of the day, than it manifested extreme restlessness. But Mr. Telby was not to be dissuaded from a speech by mere shuffling of feet and occasional calls of "Time." He boomed on for a solid hour, and when he sat down at last, the audience had appreciably thinned. A few other speeches followed, a resolution pledging the meeting to support Mr. Telby was carried, and the meeting broke up, considerably less excited at the close than at the beginning.

In the ante-room I was introduced to the editor of the *Central Standard.*

"Congratulate you on a brilliant speech, Mr. Trewint," he said. And then he closed one eye.

"The ending was very clever, very ingenious. But I am afraid it won't work."

"How do you think I intended it to work?" I asked, smiling knowingly, as I saw he expected.

"Of course, it means 'Let's cry quits.' But Vicars won't. Not he. I know him better than you do. I expect you'll have some nasty knocks before you finish."

"I must try and bear them patiently."

He chuckled. "Bear them patiently! Is that what you call it? I gave the nod to our reporter to take you down verbatim when I saw you had the gloves on. We're going to have some fun this election, I think."

"I hate personalities."

"They form amusing reading, and that's what I have to consider. Will you remember me to Sir Gerald? Good-by."

"One moment," I said hastily. "On the whole, I should prefer if you could—er—moderate my remarks about Mr. Vicars. Things read so differently——"

"Oh, I'll see that nothing libelous goes in. You may depend on me. It's a battle of giants, sir!" And off he ran.

Mr. Telby and his daughters and I drove home together. Milly sat next to me.

"Good speech, that of yours," said Mr. Telby, "though you spoiled it at the end. Whatever made you do that?"

I turned to Milly. "Did I spoil it?"

"I thought the end was the only redeeming feature," returned Milly very distinctly.

Mr. Telby was annoyed.

At breakfast the next morning Mr. Telby was in a mood of mingled humors.

"They've cut me down," he said, as I entered the breakfast room, "but they've given you a column. Here, you'll want to read the report."

"No, thank you," I replied, repressing a shudder.

"By Jove, you rapped into him," said Mr. Telby, and he began to read extracts from the report.

"Did I say that?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Of course you did. And listen to this." The wretched man continued to read aloud.

I groaned. Luckily Molly had a headache, and was having breakfast in her own room. I turned to Milly.

"Have you read it too?"

Her color rose. "I? Oh, yes."

"It must look awful in print?"

"It—it is very clever," she said vaguely.

"And vulgar?" I asked. "I haven't slept all night from pure shame."

"Oh, no, I shouldn't call it vulgar. Only——"

I waited. Mr. Telby was too engrossed to pay us any attention.

"Only what?" I asked, for she showed no sign of finishing her sentence.

"Only I am sorry for Molly," she whispered.

"So am I. I'm a brute."

She lifted her head sharply. "That's quite absurd. He began it. He was very unfair to you."

"I wish you had left out that end bit," growled Mr. Telby. "What did you want to give him a testimonial for?"

I disregarded him. "The newspaper man," I said to Milly, "suggested I wanted to cry 'quits.'"

"I wish you would," she replied fervently.

"I am willing for my part, but will Mr. Vicars?"

She shook her head doubtfully.

"And if he won't, shall I let him alone, notwithstanding?"

She was silent. Perhaps opposing sentiments were struggling in her breast. Finally her color rose and her eyes flashed. "Certainly not," she

cried with emphasis. "If he can't behave, he—he must be taught to."

I glanced at Mr. Telby, who was still engrossed.

"But Molly?" I murmured.

A troubled look crept over her face. "Poor Molly," she sighed.

I rose from the table. "I suppose you can't add 'Poor Fred,'" I said, "for I assure you I need pity too."

"Poor Mr. Trewint," she returned, smiling. "And poor Milly. We are all in the same boat."

I opened the door for her, for she had picked up her bunch of keys, preparatory to departure.

"If you and I are in the same boat," I said softly, "why, I am not so much to be pitied, after all."

CHAPTER XV

CALUMNY

BUT Mr. Vicars would not cry "quits." Very far from it, indeed! At the next meeting he addressed he alluded to my observations, and stated with precision that under no circumstances could he meet me on terms of friendship. "Such a friendship," he was reported to have said, "would be contamination. It was not possible to touch pitch and not be defiled!" This was evidently too strong for his audience, for the newspapers chronicled "Interruption." Whereupon, speaking with increased heat, he declared that he could not recount before a mixed audience the episodes which colored my career "with purple patches," but they might accept his personal assurances that, if he liked to speak, I should be hooted out of Trewint.

Of course I challenged Mr. Vicars to produce his proof, and went on to say if he did not do so, he stood branded before the community as a *liar*. My other retorts I need not recount, but they were

not conciliatory. It was on this occasion, I remember, that our carriage was dragged part of the way homewards by some of the audience, who afterwards smashed all Mr. Vicars' front windows. I confess I was not proud of our supporters. Mr. Vicars, of course, declared we "hired" them, but, for the good they did us, I should rather have preferred to pay them to support the Radical candidate.

Mr. Vicars' "purple patch" speech caused considerable comment in the newspapers. The *Central Standard* called on him to substantiate his charges or to withdraw them, and even the *Chronicle* expressed a fear that he had gone too far. "We feel," said its leading article, "that personalities have been too much indulged in, and we cannot conscientiously acquit Mr. Vicars of being chiefly to blame. No doubt Mr. Trewint has responded in terms which cannot possibly be defended, but Mr. Vicars commenced the duel by alleging that Mr. Trewint had been fined for drunkenness in public places, a charge which is found to refer to Mr. Trewint's undergraduate days. We trust this unseemly wrangling will cease, and we advise Mr. Vicars to withdraw his latest innuendo."

Everyone with whom I came in contact ex-

pressed their utmost disbelief in Mr. Vicars' veiled allegations, but I have little doubt that most people believed that there was some foundation for them. When insinuations are made against a man, his acquaintances are inclined to accept them as true; their tribute to his possible innocence is to clamor for "proof." "There is no smoke without fire" is a proverb which embodies more injustice than any other six words in the English language.

A month previously I should not have minded, but circumstances had changed. I was in love with Milly; I could no longer disguise that fact from myself, and it sometimes seemed to me that she was impressed, almost against her will, by the series of calumnies to which I was exposed. A young man is sometimes flattered by being regarded as a "gay dog," but this is not the case when his aim is to win the love of a pure woman.

I realized that Vicars believed every word he uttered, and I knew that Trefusis was behind him, whispering lies into his ear—lies which he was only too willing to believe. The demon of jealousy was at work in his brain, and for the time being he had lost his reasoning faculty. I could understand, and was even sorry for him. And yet his constant reiteration on all occasions of charges implying that I was one with whom no decent person

should associate began to distress me. I once even consulted Mr. Telby's solicitor, but he advised me to do nothing.

"So far Mr. Vicars had made no specific charge against you," he said, "with the exception of that of drunkenness, of which you disposed. As to the rest, his remarks are not much more than vulgar abuse, and by our law one man is entitled to abuse another."

"You mean I have no remedy?"

"I don't say that," he responded guardedly. "But, in any case, you have no immediate remedy, and, therefore, I advise you to seek none. Actions for defamation of character started at election times are usually dropped when the poll is declared. It is better never to start them."

As there was nothing else to be done, I determined to "grin and bear it." In the meantime the work went on, and I put my shoulder to the wheel and worked as I had never worked before. If the election was lost, people would say it was due to my association with Mr. Telby's candidature, and that was what I was anxious they should not say.

I drove over one day to Trewint Hall and looked into Mrs. Tarling's cottage. She was alone when I entered. I asked her where her son was.

"In the town, sir. I see little of him. He's so busy about the election."

I was not surprised to hear this, because I had noticed that Tarling attended all our meetings, and usually led the cheering. I shrewdly suspected he attended the opposition meetings in a different rôle.

Just as I was leaving he came in.

"Ah, Tarling," I said, "I hear you are working very hard on Mr. Telby's behalf."

He grinned rather sheepishhly. "On your behalf, sir."

"I think, perhaps," I said, "a little less enthusiasm at our meetings would be better. I have noticed a slight tendency to noisiness now and then."

"I can't always keep the boys in hand," he said. "They're so proud of you, and so disgusted with the lies the parson keeps telling."

"Your late master is at the bottom of that," I observed rather bitterly.

He nodded. "I guessed that," he returned. "But let him wait. We'll teach him before we've done to keep his dirty lies to himself."

"You take care, young man," I said. "Don't you meddle with Mr. Trefusis. He has a nasty knack of getting even with those who annoy him. He is getting even with me at the present moment."

"The last word isn't spoken," he returned doggedly. "This is Trewint, and Mr. Trefusis can't come and do what he likes here. The boys will have something to say to him before he leaves, or I am mistaken."

It did not seem useful to continue the discussion. "While you are my servant, Tarling," I said peremptorily, "just keep out of all mischief. If it got known that you disturbed Mr. Vicars' meetings, it would be exceedingly awkward for me. In fact, I don't want you to attend any of them in future. You understand?"

"Very well, sir," he replied respectfully.

The old woman intervened in her high quaver. "He was real good to me, was Mr. Vicars, when I was down with the rheumatics; sitting on that very chair, Master Fred, reading me the Word twice a week as certain as the clock. But there, he oughtn't to call one of the family names, and that he oughtn't."

"Oh, he's a good enough fellow," I said carelessly; "but I wish he wouldn't repeat all these lies about me."

"It's Mr. Trefusis," said her son, with conviction.

"Then Mr. Trefusis ought'r be ashamed," cried his mother.

"And so he should!" I assented very heartily.

But although the newspapers called on Mr. Vicars to prove or withdraw his insinuations, he would do neither the one nor the other. He continued to deal in veiled innuendoes, and I continued to demand specific instances. But although he would not speak out, lying-tongued rumor was not so circumspect. A hundred and one stories, with the most circumstantial details, were in circulation throughout Trewint. There was hardly a fashionable woman about town whose name was not bandied about in connection with mine. The wild orgies in which I was reputed to have taken part would have satisfied the not too fastidious taste of a Roman emperor. Many of these monstrous fabrications came to my ears, and many, I suppose, did not. Whether they were started maliciously or whether their origin was due to the love people have of pretending to special information, I did not know. Personally, I was convinced that Trefusis was responsible for most, if not all. Whether this was so or not, the fact remained that fabrications, all exhibiting me as the center of a thousand intrigues, were freely passing from mouth to mouth, repeated by friend and foe alike.

What could I do? Even to a late stage of the election these stories were eagerly retailed and very

readily believed, and there is little doubt they had the effect of turning the Nonconformist influence dead against Mr. Telby. If the election had taken place a week earlier, I think Mr. Rapley would have been elected by a large majority. But a reaction set in. Mr. Vicars, people began to feel, was going too far. At one of Mr. Rapley's meetings, a local butcher, who had at one time been ejected from his shop by Mr. Telby for non-payment of rent, made a speech in which he hoped, "for the sake of humanity, that it was not true that Mr. Telby was about to marry his daughter to this reprobate. If it were true, it was a shame —a crying shame. The young lady deserved a better fate." I can imagine that at this point the speaker looked meaningly towards Mr. Vicars, for his love story was well known in the town. At any rate, it was all over the neighborhood in a day or two that Molly and I were engaged to be married. Everyone accepted the statement as true, and I even had a letter from my sister-in-law, not expressing a doubt of its truth, but only inquiring when the engagement was to be announced.

Now, I did not contradict the rumor. It was a mere rumor, and I had a certain feeling of delicacy in speaking to Mr. Telby on the subject. I guessed he did not discourage the coupling of his

daughter's name with mine, and it seemed to me best to ignore the matter.

But this gossip had a curious effect. Persons, women especially, who had been willing enough to believe me guilty of all sorts of Don Juan-like escapades, now began to frame another tale, and one not far removed from the truth. Perhaps, too, Mr. Telby's agent helped the rival story. It was to impute to Mr. Vicars the ignoble passion of jealousy as the motive for his animus against me. It explained everything to many minds; a reaction set in, which grew, and was at its strongest on the day of the poll.

CHAPTER XVI

TRIUMPH

WHEN the polling booths closed, no one ventured to predict the result. The boxes were removed to the Town Hall, and the counting of the votes commenced forthwith. As the declaration of the poll was not expected till ten o'clock at the earliest, Mr. Telby decided that we should go back to Dewhurst, returning after dinner.

We were all too anxious and excited to make much of a meal, and we had hardly finished when Mr. Telby was eager to be back at the Town Hall.

"I want to be sure that all my votes are credited to me," he said. "It's just as well to see with one's own eyes that there is no hanky-panky."

I laughed, but made no objection to starting at once.

"Don't wait up, girls," said Mr. Telby. "We may be late."

"Of course we'll wait up," cried Milly in-

dignantly. "Do you think we can sleep till we know the result?"

We drove rapidly into Trewint. Although it was hardly nine, there was already a considerable crowd before the Town Hall. Our advent was greeted with mingled cheers and groans, but the former predominated.

"The rowdy element again," I observed to Mr. Telby.

"I cannot understand," he returned testily, "why you insist on regarding my more enthusiastic supporters as rowdies."

We watched the clerks counting the votes. So far as we could ascertain, Mr. Telby led, but there were several districts still to be accounted for. We had not been in the room long when we were joined by the Liberal candidate and Mr. Vicars. They were in evening dress, and had evidently been dining together.

Mr. Telby shook his opponent by the hand, but ignored the minister. "Whatever may be the result of the election, and however much I may regret the personal element that has been introduced into this contest," he said, in his grandiose manner, "I trust that you and I, Mr. Rapley, will not permit our friendly relations to be interrupted."

Mr. Rapley, a quiet, inoffensive man, seemed a little alarmed.

"Oh, dear no; why, certainly—by all means—not."

He was close to me. I held out my hand. "I don't think we've met before," I said.

He took my hand, with a nervous glance in Vicars' direction. "I am pleased, very pleased, to make your acquaintance," he returned hurriedly. "Perhaps you will allow me to say I am sorry, most sorry that—that language has been used—rather stronger perhaps——"

"Oh, strong language doesn't count for anything at election times," I said lightly. "And, you know, 'hard words break no bones.'"

"Possibly—probably not," he answered. "Yet—I am not sure that I have always seen eye to eye with my friend, Mr. Vicars, as to certain phases of this contest. However——"

"It's all over now," I observed cheerfully.

He seemed glad to quit the subject. "I've been dining at the 'Swan,'" he ran on, "with an old university friend of yours, Mr. Trefusis, a very pleasant and well-informed young man. He—he spoke very highly of you."

"Did he indeed?" I replied rather grimly.

"Of—of your abilities, at any rate." He

stopped, as if conscious that he was making rather a mess of it. He looked vaguely round the room. "I expected him to follow us here."

At that moment, the crowd outside, which had been passing the time by alternately cheering and groaning the two candidates, Mr. Vicars, and another individual, suddenly burst into wild and discordant yells. We all made for the windows, and a curious spectacle met our gaze.

The Market Square, which is well lighted by arc lamps, is exactly opposite to the Town Hall. Looking out of the windows, we could see a surging mass of people, whose faces gleamed white in the artificial light. But we were no longer the attraction, for the crowd had shifted in the direction of the "Swan" Hotel, which faces the Market Square on its right side. In the center of the mob there seemed to be a little compact ball of humanity, which swayed and heaved to and fro.

"Whatever is the matter?" cried Mr. Telby, and we all echoed the question.

"About a score of men," observed Mr. Rapley, after a long scrutiny, "seem to be tearing to pieces some unhappy wretch."

"A pickpocket, no doubt," I suggested.

"Ah, very likely," responded Mr. Rapley, and the interest diminished.

"But what are they going to do with him?" I asked suddenly.

"They seem to be making for the horse trough," returned Mr. Rapley. There was a large stone trough in front of the hotel. "They probably intend to duck him."

"And quite right too," remarked Mr. Telby.

Mr. Vicars had joined us at the window. "I am not sure," he said, "that it is not our duty to interfere. I am no supporter of lynch law."

Mr. Telby turned towards him contemptuously. "Pray go rescue him," he retorted sneeringly. "It will be certain to make the crowd choose another victim."

Mr. Vicars did not reply, but he moved uneasily as if unable to make up his mind.

By this time, the little solid knot of men had dragged their victim to the edge of the trough. The next moment the man's body was suspended on high by a score of arms, and then swish! it was in the trough! We could see the water pouring over the edge.

Mr. Rapley was peering over my shoulder. "What a time they are holding him down!" he exclaimed. "Do they want to drown him?"

"We must really do something," I cried im-

pulsively. "Hang it, we can't let them kill the fellow."

Again the man's body was lifted upwards. For a moment it was poised overhead, and, swish! he was in the water again.

"Come," said I, and touched Vicars on the arm.

In less than a minute we were struggling with the crowd. We fought our way through the mob, most of whom seemed associated only by curiosity with what was passing in the center. I lost Vicars, but we both gained the trough together.

"Stop this," shouted Vicars. "Are you men or brutes?"

The active participators in the affair were not more than fifteen or twenty men. They turned defiantly at Vicars' words. Their wretched victim was bubbling and gasping, making frenzied efforts to escape from his bath.

"It's Vicars!" cried one of the men, who seemed to be their leader. "Hooray, let's duck him!" I recognized with a sinking heart the author of the suggestion as my servant Tarling. Some of his companions made a grab for Vicars, and I think it would not have gone well with him if I had not interfered.

"This must not go on," I cried sternly, and knocked one of the men down. They turned on

me, and then, for just one second, Tarling's eyes and mine met.

"It's Mr. Freddy Trewint," he shouted. "Three cheers for Mr. Freddy Trewint!"

The cheers were given, and then Tarling had the grace to disappear. I saw him no more that night.

"Let that man go," I commanded, pointing to the wretched object in the trough, and they let him go, and then, following their leader, melted away in the crowd. I went and helped the man out of his bath. If it had not been that his struggles had partially emptied the trough, I think he would have been drowned. As it was, he had almost to be lifted out.

"Will you take one arm?" I said to Vicars. "He is half dead."

And then I noticed that, though he was in rags, his rags had once been dress clothes. His hair was plastered over his face, but there was something familiar in his appearance. I think his identity dawned on Vicars and myself simultaneously.

"Trefusis!"

And so it was. Then I understood Tarling's participation.

"Where shall we take him?" I asked, feeling as if I were in some way to blame for his plight.

"To the Town Hall," returned Vicars. "I will send for a cab and take him home."

So we dragged the dejected wretch through the curious crowd and up the stone steps of the Town Hall. We were met by most of the members of the two election committees, headed by the rival candidates. They pressed forward with many questions.

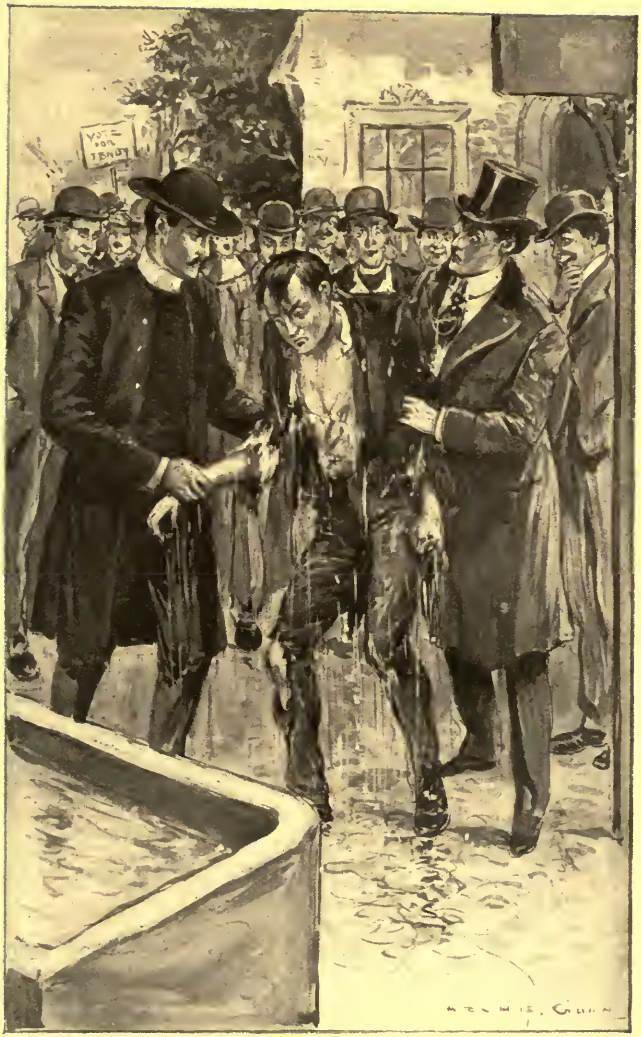
Trefusis, still spluttering and gasping, was slowly regaining his breath. He was evidently not much the worse for his experiences, but he presented a sorry figure. His coat was in rags, and his shirt, bereft of starch, had given way at the neck, exposing his bare chest. His tattered garments clung round him like a woman's bathing costume, and his course was marked by little streams of water. For some minutes before he was fully capable of speech he had been gesticulating wildly, and pointing in my direction.

"He did this! He is responsible for this!" were his first articulate words.

Everyone stood round him, eying him with great curiosity, as if he were some strange animal.

"Don't—don't you think," said Mr. Rapley in his hesitating way, "he will catch cold?"

"I certainly think he ought to be taken home," said Mr. Telby. "Most remarkable incident! I



Trefusis.

cannot help feeling that Mr. Trefusis is a martyr to his friendship with Mr. Vicars. There can be no doubt that the methods Mr. Vicars has thought fit to employ do not commend themselves to an English electorate. And this is the unhappy result."

"He did this! He did this!" gasped Trefusis, impotently indicating me.

"I hope his mind has not given way," said Mr. Rapley, benevolently regarding him through folded *pince-nez*.

Mr. Vicars had been gloomily silent. "The matter will have to be inquired into," he said at length, "and if Mr. Trewint is responsible, he will answer for it."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" returned Mr. Telby.

"I—I think he should be taken away," hinted Mr. Rapley gently.

"I have sent for a cab," replied Mr. Vicars curtly. "Ah, is it there? At the back entrance? Thank you." He took Trefusis by the arm and began to lead him away. At that moment a hurried movement on the staircase made us turn.

"The returning officer is just about to declare the result of the polling," shouted someone.

"What is it? What is it?" we all exclaimed, and raced pell-mell up the stairs. Trefusis was

left to shiver alone, for even Vicars deserted him. When the result was announced, it was found that Mr. Telby was returned as the Parliamentary representative of the Borough of Trewint by a majority of seventy-three votes!

CHAPTER XVII

FAILURE

I TOOK train for London the following day, and in the afternoon called on my brother. He welcomed me with a warmth which it has seldom been my lot to receive from him.

"So you have managed to pull the chestnuts out of the fire?" he said, shaking my hand—usually we met with a curt nod. "I congratulate you; I confess it was more than I expected. The news came while we were in Committee last night, and caused a good deal of excitement. I happened to speak shortly afterwards, and they gave me a tremendous reception."

"Did they?" I asked absently.

"They felt, no doubt, that my name and influence had a good deal to do with the result."

"No doubt," I replied indifferently. "How's Mabel?"

But Mabel entered at the moment, and, fluttering up, kissed me on both cheeks.

"Dear, dear Fred," cried she. "So many,

many congratulations. What a dear, clever boy you are."

"Do you know what the Prime Minister said to me last night?" asked Gerald.

"No; what?"

"'Smart young fellow, your brother; we ought to have him in the House.'"

"Did he really say that?" asked Mabel.

"He did, indeed."

"Then he's heard about it too?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, about Fred's engagement, of course."

Gerald smiled. "No, my dear, he was not alluding to that." He turned to me, and in the gayety of his heart dug me in the ribs. On the whole, I prefer my brother in his more sober moods.

"I'm not engaged," I replied curtly.

But they declined to believe me, putting my denial down to natural coyness.

"Not actually engaged, perhaps," suggested my brother; "but—well, on the border line. Eh, what? Little love passages now and again? Ah, you dog!"

I dare say I reddened—who would not?—and this was deemed proof positive.

"You are not to tease Fred," said Mabel in-

dulgently. "I dare say he has had to work very hard lately, and is very tired. Sit down, Fred."

"I must go," I said hastily.

My brother had taken up a position in front of the fireplace and evidently intended a prolonged chat. "Nonsense," he cried testily. "I want to hear all about the election. Is it true they ducked your friend Trefusis, as the *Times* says?"

Mabel gave a little cry. "Mr. Trefusis!" she exclaimed. "Was he at Trewint?"

"Of course he was," responded Gerald. "Vicars' right-hand man, wasn't he, Fred?"

Mabel subsided suddenly into a chair.

"I wish it had been Vicars who had got ducked," continued Gerald. "The *Times* says they would have done so if you had not intervened. If that's the case, it was the silliest thing you did during the election. By Jove, I would have given a hundred pounds to have seen it!"

"Mr. Trefusis ducked!" said Mabel in a faint voice.

I rose. "It was an unfortunate incident, which I very much regret. But I really must go. I have an appointment."

Gerald regarded me for a moment. "Do you know, Fred, you have aged ten years?"

"Absurd!" I cried angrily.

"Hasn't he, Mabel?"

Mabel looked at me thoughtfully. "You do seem more—more serious," said she. "But I like you best like that." And then she rose with less than her usual deliberateness. "Now I understand why that Mr. Vicars said all those horrid things about you—and—and I'm afraid you've been having a dreadful time. I am sorry, Fred, so—so sorry."

"I haven't been having a dreadful time," I replied, trying to speak lightly. "I've had, on the whole, a very jolly time."

"Miss Telby saw to that," chuckled my brother.

Mabel looked at me fixedly. "Miss Telby?" she repeated slowly. "I wonder if she's good enough for Fred."

"Good enough!" echoed my brother. "Great heavens!"

I felt embarrassed. "If I ever marry," I said slowly, "it will be someone far too good for me."

Gerald put his head on one side and shut one eye.

"When is something definite likely to be fixed up between you and Telby's girl?" he asked.

"I—I don't know." And I fled hastily.

Why should they torment me like this? I walked down Piccadilly full of misery. Only a few hours ago I had walked with Milly in the gardens at Dewhurst, but how long ago it seemed! I recalled every word of our conversation, and the recollection made my nerves quiver afresh. Perhaps she was right; perhaps I should only make her unhappy. There were other women in the world. But I knew that, so far as I was concerned, there was only one.

My mind was full of our last interview. That morning I had asked her to come into the garden, and she had consented readily. As we came into the sunlight, I noticed that there were black rings round her eyes, and I asked her if she was well.

"Oh, yes," she said, "except that I did not sleep last night."

"How was that?"

"I was making up my mind about something."

I looked at her quickly. "I suppose I mustn't ask about what?"

She shook her head. We were out of sight of the house, and I stopped suddenly.

"Milly," I said, "I told you last night that I wanted to speak to you before I left for town. You must know, for women always know these things, what it is I have to say."

She turned away. "Please do not go on, Mr. Trewint," she replied.

"I must go on. I love you, Milly, and I must tell you so."

"I am sorry you have told me this."

"You cannot love me?"

"I cannot marry you." She raised her eyes slowly to mine.

I stopped dead. "Why?" I asked abruptly.

"I do not think you would make me happy. I do not think I should make you happy."

"Why?"

"Do not make me explain. It will only cause you to think me what I have already told you I am."

"You mean," I said, "that I am not good enough for you?"

"I mean that we look at the world from different standpoints. Oh, I know that if I try to explain I shall only make you laugh at me."

"I shall not laugh at you," I said, grimly enough.

"We are so different," she went on desperately. "To you life isn't anything serious—the world is merely a pleasant place to pass the time. To me—oh, how priggish it sounds, but I am only telling you what is in my heart—life is full of duties. If

I marry you, I must give up what I consider to be essential."

"You can still pursue your duties, even though you marry me," I said.

Her forehead was furrowed. "You do not understand me," she answered quickly. "Life is so real and earnest to me that I cannot consent to marry a man who, by his own admission, is a mere trifler."

I was silent. "Is that your only reason?" I said at length. "You are sure you are not swayed by the lies which have been told about me for the last three weeks? Are you sure of that?"

She hesitated. "I—do not think so," she said at length.

"Do you believe them?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"I don't think I believe them."

"You don't think?" I said bitterly.

She made a sudden movement to my side and laid her hand on my arm. "Ah, I have hurt you," she cried, the tears starting to her eyes. "I did not mean to do that."

"If I were to swear to you that all these stories were false, would it make any difference?"

She shook her head. "No. It would make

no difference. I have thought it over, and I know that we are not suited to one another. It is far better we should part."

I held out my hand and she put hers into it. Her face was turned away, but I saw she was weeping.

"Oh, Milly, Milly," I said, "aren't we going to make a stupid mistake, you and I? Are we not going to part on absurdly inadequate grounds? And don't you think we shall regret it all our lives?"

Her womanly pride was roused. "Right or wrong," she cried, with offended dignity, "I am entitled to my choice, and I have made it."

"I believe," said I softly, "that you love me."

She wrested her hand from mine, and turned her flushed face from me.

"Yes," she cried defiantly, "I do love you, but I shall not marry you." And then, without looking back, she hurried away in the direction of the house.

Was this the end? I told myself as I walked down Piccadilly that it was only the beginning. The lies that had been told about me—and I knew not what she might have heard—had influenced her, perhaps unconsciously; but her sense of pro-

portion would reassert itself. She would reconsider her decision later on. So I tried to comfort myself, but with little avail. The fact remained that the woman I loved had refused to be my wife because she deemed me unworthy of her.

CHAPTER XVIII

HIS REAL FRIEND

MY life fell into its old routine, and I drifted aimlessly through the days. But I no longer found the same pleasure in the gentle diversions which had formerly made up the sum of my existence. Milly was always in my thoughts, and I hardly dared to attend a race meeting or a polo match, lest some stupid society paragraph should chronicle my presence, and Milly, reading it, should distastefully turn up her pretty nose at this further evidence of my triviality.

One day my brother happened to mention casually that one of Lord Welford's secretaries (unpaid) had received an official appointment. I heard the news nonchalantly, until it united itself in my mind with the realization that the days were now very long.

"I should rather like the job," I observed thoughtfully.

My brother raised his eyebrows. "My dear

fellow, how often have I offered to make you my secretary?"

"Oh, I don't want to be your secretary," I returned rudely.

My brother winced. "Oh, am I not good enough? But do I understand your highness will condescend to assist Lord Welford?"

"You see," I said apologetically, for I saw I had hurt his feelings, "Welford is at the War Office. It is the only department in which I take the slightest interest."

"Oh, indeed," responded Gerald, still offended, "and let me tell you a more ill-managed department, or a more incompetent head, you will not find elsewhere."

"Very likely," I returned carelessly, and thought no more of the matter. A few days later my brother came and told me that he had arranged matters with Lord Welford, and that he would accept my services.

"Oh, bother," I said ungraciously, for by that time my sudden zeal had evaporated.

"You said yourself——" began Gerald, with rising wrath.

"But that was nearly a week ago," I objected.

My brother glowered at me. "You young jackass!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I am

going to be humbugged in this way? At my request, Lord Welford kindly agrees to take as his secretary an imbecile without an idea in his empty head—and then the helpless idiot changes his mind and—and——"

Milly floated before my mental vision, charmingly disdainful. "You are quite right," I said humbly; "I am an empty-headed idiot. But I am not so foolish as to refuse the position your kindness has found for me. I will accept the post, if Lord Welford will have me."

Gerald's anger faded away. "You are very changeable, Fred," he said, almost sadly. "Since you went to Trewint you have seemed a different man. What is it?"

"Why, nothing," I replied hastily.

He looked at me fixedly, shook his head, sighed, and left me. I suppose my brother Gerald was fonder of me than I gave him credit for.

A trial, which at times seemed almost more than I could bear, was the repeated rumor of my engagement to Molly Telby. I dare say Mabel had something to do with its persistence, though, no doubt, Mr. Telby assisted. Go where I might, I was met with congratulations. I contradicted the story time after time, and people smiled knowingly and "hoped they hadn't been indiscreet." At

length I got callous, and let them say what they liked. After all, what did it matter? If I was not engaged to Molly, I wanted to be engaged to Milly; and if either of them didn't like the report, let her deny it. It was their business as much as mine!

I was continually meeting Trefusis. He would look at me with a grave, almost reproachful look; and I would turn away curtly, for I felt nothing he could say or do would ever rid me of the feelings of distrust and aversion with which I regarded him. He seemed anxious to show by his manner that he wanted to meet me on amicable terms, but I gave him no encouragement.

One evening, however, I happened to dine at my brother's house, and after dinner, Mrs. Fielders, who was present, commenced to talk about him.

"Isn't it very, very sad about poor Mr. Trefusis?" she said.

Mabel jumped, as she always did, at the mention of his name. She had never mastered her fear that her letters to him might come to her husband's knowledge.

Gerald was standing with his back to the fire, sipping his coffee. "What about?" he asked. "Do you mean that ducking he got at Trewint?

Serve him right. 'Shun bad companions,' as the copy-books say."

"I wasn't alluding to that," Mrs. Fielders continued placidly, "though, I dare say, it has something to do with it. It must be most dangerous to be ducked. I should dislike it so very much."

"He has survived it, any way," I said.

"Ah, but haven't you heard? The doctors say he can't live more than a few months. I never liked Mr. Trefusis; I used to discourage him almost to the point of rudeness when he hung about Mabel. Yet he is very good-looking, and it is always so sad to know that a familiar face will shortly disappear."

There was a dead silence. Then Gerald put his cup and saucer on the mantelpiece with a little rattle. The mention of death always has a disconcerting effect.

"Dear me, very melancholy indeed," he said at length.

Mabel's face was paler than usual. "Are you sure, mamma, there is no mistake?"

"Oh, no, my dear. Everyone is talking about it. I wonder you haven't heard of it before. I saw Mr. Trefusis yesterday, and his face quite chilled me."

"What is wrong with him?" I asked.

"Consumption, I am told."

"How horrible," Mabel murmured. Her eyes caught mine, and I confess I did not like to see in them the light of relief, for the news had shocked me.

"A lingering death is remarkably unpleasant," observed Mrs. Fielders, with the air of one learned in psychology. "Fancy marking off the days in a calendar—one day less to live!"

"Don't, mother, don't," cried Mabel.

"And yet we all must die," continued Mrs. Fielders, who loved to moralize when a fit opportunity presented itself. "It is as well we should remember it. Mabel, we will go and hear the dear Bishop next Sunday."

I left my brother's house at the earliest moment and went to my club, with a half intention of speaking to Trefusis if I found him there. I told myself I had every cause to cherish feelings of animosity towards him, but, at the same time, I could not hear unmoved that day by day he had to confront the certainty of an early death. He had behaved disgracefully, no doubt; but, then, perhaps he realized it.

When I reached the club I found him, as it chanced, in the smoking room with a friend, whom I recognized as an actor called Beaumont—a man

with not a very savory reputation. I returned Trefusis' nod cordially, Beaumont left him shortly afterwards, and I immediately took the chair thus vacated.

"I am sorry to hear that you have not been well," I began. It was not a particularly tactful opening.

"No," he replied, "I am not well."

I was silent for a few moments. "I hope that stupid episode at Trewint did not hurt you?"

He hesitated. "No; I hardly think so," he replied at length. "Pray do not think that."

The impression conveyed to my mind was that he wished to spare my feelings.

"I trust," I continued awkwardly, "there is nothing very seriously wrong?"

He leant back and closed his eyes. "Nothing," he replied, with a little bitter laugh, "if I could ignore what the doctors say. I feel perfectly well."

"What do they say?" I asked gently.

He raised himself in his chair. "They say I am dying."

I felt it would be mockery to offer condolences or express regret, and yet I must say something.

"I hope they are mistaken."

"And so indeed do I." He let himself fall back listlessly.

"I am terribly shocked," I said, "and I want to say how sorry I am." He did not open his eyes, but stretched out his hand, and I took it.

"Thank you for coming to me," he said, and his voice broke. "When one stands, as I do, facing the unknown, one's views of life change materially. I have done many things for which I am sorry. I have often been moved by ignoble impulses. Perhaps, though, it is only cowardice that makes me want to repair the past."

I was greatly touched. "My dear fellow, we all make mistakes."

He moved restlessly. "I am glad I have not injured you, though I admit I have tried to do so. I hope you will be happy with the girl you love; she is very beautiful." I was silent. I knew he was alluding to Molly, and it was on my lips to say she was nothing to me, but I refrained. It would have introduced a jarring note.

"Are you sure there is no hope?" I asked.

He shook his head mournfully. "The doctors say I may prolong my life a little if I go back to Australia. So I am going. But, as to a cure, I know it is hopeless. It is strange how one clings to life, unhappy though it may be."

"When do you leave?" I asked, to say something.

"To-morrow week." He raised himself again. "Oh, you can't tell how glad I am you have spoken to me. It has taken a burden off my mind. For these last few days I remain in England I may consider you my friend, may I not?"

"Yes, yes."

"There is but little time left to say good-by to one's friends," he resumed wistfully. "And now that I leave so soon I should like to ask a favor of you. If you don't care to grant it, don't hesitate to say so. I shall not mind, for, after what has passed, you will be justified."

"I will do anything I can to please you."

"It is really nothing much," he went on, with a nervous laugh. "You may think it pure sentimentality, but I want to feel you are once more my friend—to feel I shall not leave anyone behind who dislikes me when I go on my far journey."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked sympathetically.

"Only this. Next Thursday, my last day in England—I leave on Friday—a few of my friends —my real friends—are coming to my rooms to say good-by. I am going to give a farewell supper-party. Will you come as one of them?"

"Of course I will," I replied heartily.

"Thank you." He rose wearily and held out his hand. "The doctor says I must not keep late hours. But on Thursday I must risk making an exception. We are going first to the 'Empire' —it is quite a bachelor party, and I don't want it to be a melancholy one. Supper is at midnight at my chambers. Perhaps you would prefer to join us then?"

"If you don't mind," I replied hastily. "You see, I have to be at the House now most evenings."

He nodded. "Good-by for the present."

As he passed out his face was mirrored for an instant in one of the glasses with which the room is paneled. His expression haunted me. What did it mean?

CHAPTER XIX

ENTRAPPED

CROSSING Hyde Park a few days later I met young Gilbert Telby. He seemed inclined to hurry on with a passing nod, but I stopped short. When a man has been hungering for weeks for news of the girl he loves, he is not likely to let her brother slip by without some attempt at conversation.

I was astonished by his altered appearance. His healthy complexion had faded to a pasty yellow, and from his nervous, anxious manner he might have passed for a detected pickpocket.

"What is the matter?" I asked, almost involuntarily.

"Matter?" he repeated, with a laugh that seemed to catch somewhere in his throat. "Nothing's the matter."

"You don't look well."

"I'm all right." He traced figures on the gravel path with the point of his walking stick. I looked at him curiously, and he writhed under my scrutiny.

"I must be off," he muttered. "I have an appointment."

"Which way are you going?"

He pointed vaguely in the direction of Hyde Park Corner.

"I'll walk along with you," I said. He did not seem overjoyed, but we moved off together.

"How is your father?" I asked.

"Oh, he's all right."

"And Miss Telby?"

"Oh, she's all right."

"And—and your other sister?"

"Oh, all right."

"I suppose they are still at Dewhurst?"

"Oh, no; the governor and Molly are up in town. They are staying at the Hotel Cecil."

"I will call. Did you say your younger sister is with them?"

"Oh, no; she's in Switzerland, at Caux, with her aunt."

"At Caux!" I echoed. "For long?"

"I believe she is going to stay the winter." His manner was so stiff and embarrassed that I could not help realizing he was longing to be rid of me. So I held out my hand.

"Well, good-by," I said. "Very glad to have met you."

He put a nerveless hand into mine, his eyes anywhere save on my face. His expression of misery and pain recalled in some inscrutable way Milly as I had last seen her. Moved by a sudden impulse, I put my hand on his arm.

"Are you in trouble, Gilbert?" I asked. "Can I help you?"

He gave me a quick glance, swallowing something in his throat.

"There's nothing wrong with me," he replied sullenly, "except that I've been going it a bit lately and have a beast of a headache."

"I hope that your father," I said, with sudden alarm, "isn't still harping on that stupid affair?"

He looked at me vacantly. "What affair?" he asked. "Oh, about Trefusis? Oh, no; he's forgotten all about that."

I did not press him further. It occurred to me that probably he was playing his part in one of these sordid dramas in which young men so often gain their first experiences of the bitter side of life.

"Come and look me up some day," I said.

"I'm leaving for Cairo to-morrow."

"The deuce you are!"

"And damned glad to get away, too," he added bitterly. "We are putting up a bridge for the

Government, and I am going as one of the assistant engineers."

"Well, I wish you luck."

"Luck!" he exclaimed derisively. "I don't know what the word means."

On Thursday morning—the day of Trefusis' supper party—I was very much vexed to find in the *Morning Post* a formal announcement of my engagement to "Miss Mary Telby, eldest daughter of John Telby, M. P., of Dewhurst, Trewint." Who could have inserted it? The *Post's* announcements are almost invariably official communications, and I realized that everyone would accept the truth of the paragraph without question. And so it turned out. During the course of the morning I received half a dozen notes of congratulation, including a hurried note from my brother and an effusive scrawl from Mabel.

I was so irritated by these repeated felicitations that I penned an angry note to the editor, requesting an immediate contradiction. This I intended to dispatch at once, in order that the contradiction might appear in the next issue of the paper, but I omitted to post the letter, which I discovered still in my pocket when I was starting for Trefusis' chambers. That there might be no further delay I placed the letter in the first pillar-box I came to.

It was just midnight when I pressed Trefusis' bell. My mind went back to the last occasion on which I had stood at his door. I had not thought then that the next time I should seek admission it would be as one of his friends—his real friends, as he phrased it—gathered to bid him an eternal farewell. The whole position seemed strained and unnatural, and it was with a feeling of no little embarrassment that I crossed the threshold.

Trefusis welcomed me warmly, and I was received with cheerful acclamations by his other guests, who were already seated round the supper table.

"Pray forgive us for not waiting," said Trefusis. "We got back earlier than we expected, and these fellows pretended they were starving."

I made some reply and sat down in the only vacant chair. There were about a dozen men present, most of whom I knew more or less intimately; a few I knew by sight, and amongst these was Beaumont, the actor. He was a man whom many people absolutely declined to know. Considering the melancholy occasion, the party certainly seemed a very merry one. They had evidently made the most of their visit to the "Empire," for several could not, by any extension of the term, be called sober, and all the rest, with

the exception of Trefusis himself, had evidently had as much to drink as was good for them.

The supper was a lavish one, but the majority seemed in no mood for eating. Champagne frothed and fizzed, and faces were unnaturally flushed; and foolish, pointless stories were received with roars of laughter. I do not desire to pose as a Puritan, for many a time I have been to similar gatherings and enjoyed them. But in the present case I was out of touch with the rest of the party. I entered, cool and collected; they were flushed and excited by an evening's revelry. Naturally, the witticisms which appealed to them failed to amuse me. I felt as a teetotaler might amongst topers. Ordinary good manners made me disguise my feelings, but I had not been five minutes in the room before I was racking my brain for an excuse to escape.

The room where we supped was connected by folding-doors with the room in which I had had my previous encounter with Trefusis. I was glad the folding-doors were closed, for it would have been embarrassing both to my host and to myself to have had that incident too vividly brought to our recollection.

I noticed that Trefusis did not drink much, but there was an unwonted color on his face, and a glit-

ter in his dark eyes, which showed unusual excitement. I regarded him with a feeling of sympathy. There is always something pathetic about a farewell, and in the present case were we not bidding him good-by in the most solemn sense?

Supper at an end, cigars were lit and liquids in a more concentrated form circulated anew. Men rose from time to time to make maudlin speeches, which commenced in incoherency and ended in confusion. Trefusis responded to the toasts of which he was the subject with a due gravity and a certain aptness. References were continually made by the speakers in terms intended to be touching to the melancholy occasion of the banquet, and a drunken sentimentality reigned for a few minutes, to be dissipated by a loud burst of hilarity over some not very seemly jest.

I suppose it was about one o'clock when Beaumont annoyed me exceedingly by getting on his feet and proposing my health. I have said I did not know Beaumont, and I did not wish to know him. It was, it seemed to me, a piece of intolerable impertinence that he should propose my health at all; but when he began to allude to my reported engagement to Molly, I felt my wrath rising. It put me in a false position. How could I explain to this drunken crew that there was no engage-

ment? It was distasteful to hear her name—the name of Milly's sister—mentioned by such a man and in such company.

"We congratulate him," continued Beaumont, swaying on his feet, "for he is going to marry the beautiful Molly. We should all like to marry her, but as we can't do so in this overcivilized country, why, let's drink the happy man's health."

I looked at Trefusis, mutely protesting, but he only shrugged his shoulders, deprecatingly, as if to say that he was sorry, but could do nothing. There was a chorus of cheers. Some of the men present were friends of mine, and gentlemen; but the keen edge of good taste soon gets blunted by an unrestrained conviviality. When Beaumont sat down I hesitated what to do—whether to say what I felt or to let the matter drop. Just then, however, a servant entered the room and handed Trefusis a card. "A lady to see you, sir," he said, in an audible whisper.

Of course there was a loud outcry. Trefusis glanced at the card, and then looked towards me with an evil gleam in his eyes.

"I cannot see her," he said. "Tell her to go away, or—or to come later."

There was a shout of protest, "We'll clear out

if you like," said Beaumont. "Don't like to interrupt any little private meeting with a lady."

Trefusis frowned and shook his head. "Where is she?"

The servant indicated the adjoining room.

"I can't see her. Excuse this interruption, gentlemen, but this—person has no right to annoy me. I have done with women of this kind. She presumes on what is past."

"Oh, the naughty lady!" shrieked Beaumont. And the men laughed and shouted uproariously.

"Say I am engaged," said Trefusis to the servant. "Tell her to go away."

"Wait a minute!" cried Beaumont. "Why shouldn't we have her in? It's a damned shame to send away an old sweetheart when she comes to say good-by." The men hailed the suggestion with rapturous applause.

"No, no," expostulated Trefusis. "I won't have it!"

"Hang it all, why not?" cried Beaumont. "I want to see the dear creature. You have such good taste, Trefusis. Let's have her in!"

"Let's have her in!" echoed some of the others. They shouted and hammered on the table; the din was indescribable. Then Beaumont, who was

sitting with his back to the folding-doors, sprang up and laid his hand on the knob.

"No, no, you must not!" cried Trefusis. He half rose to his feet, but his eyes were still on mine, and there was a fiendish malignancy in his look.

Beaumont disregarded him and flung open the folding-doors. In the center of the inner room, staring at us with terrified eyes, stood Molly!

For some moments there was no movement. It was as if everyone in the room had been turned into stone. Then Trefusis sprang to the doors and closed them.

I rose from my seat and came from my place like a man in a dream. I do not think I hurried. I came to Trefusis' side, as he stood holding the handle of the doors.

"Let me pass," I said.

"I wished to spare you this," he returned.

"Let me pass."

"No, you cannot pass."

For a moment we stood still, looking into each other's eyes; and, in that moment, I realized the depth of malice and vindictiveness in the man's heart. I took him by the throat and flung him violently aside. He fell on the table; there was a crash of glass. Then I opened the doors, but the room was empty.

"Staring at us with terrified eyes, stood Molly!"

I looked back. Beaumont was assisting Trefusis to his feet. His hands were pressed to his face, but I saw blood creeping through his fingers, and I noticed a drop fell on his shirt-front.

I went out of the place and down the stairs.

CHAPTER XX

POOR MOLLY

WHAT was Molly doing in Trefusis' rooms more than an hour after midnight? The interpretation which Trefusis had more than hinted at I rejected without a moment's consideration. He had planned, with his creature, Beaumont, the little drama which had been carried through with complete success from his point of view. On this point I had no doubt. Everything, in fact, was very clear to me, except Molly's presence. How had he secured that? I paced the floor of my room till dawn dimmed the electric light, trying in vain to find an answer.

With all his cleverness he had missed his mark. He had intended to injure me through the woman I loved; but I did not love Molly. It was my duty, of course, to see she was put right in the eyes of the world, for she had borne my burden. But, still, Molly was not Milly. Supposing—I felt the sweat on my brow—supposing he had not blundered and Milly had faced that drunken crew!

Supposing his shameful artifice had left these shameful thoughts in the minds of these men of Milly—Milly whom I loved? Thank God, she had been spared that! I stopped dead, and my breath came heavily. Yes, he would have had his revenge, but, by Heaven! he should have suffered.

I could not think of the danger Milly had escaped without a sickening sense of horror. I found myself muttering "Thank God, it was only Molly!" and I was ashamed of myself. How selfish I was! Surely my solicitude for poor Molly's honor should be as intense as for that of her sister. But it was not. If it had been Milly! I bowed my head in my hands and shuddered. As it was only Molly, I resumed my self-possession and decided very clearly that my course of action was, first of all, to discover for what reason or by what lie he had induced her to go to his rooms at such an hour, and then to make him avow, in the most public way, his share in the dastardly trick.

I went to bed at length, and slept soundly till late the next morning. I abused Tarling for not calling me at my usual time, had my bath, dressed and breakfasted, proud that my brain was calm and clear, and looking forward almost eagerly to my crusade on Molly's behalf.

I went straight to the Hotel Cecil, and ascertained that Molly was in. I sent up my name, and, after an interval, her maid came to say her mistress was not feeling well enough to see me.

"Is Miss Telby out of bed?" I asked abruptly.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Then tell her I must see her."

The maid departed on her errand, and I waited irritably for the answer. When the woman returned, it was to repeat that her mistress could not see me.

I was annoyed. Here was I burning to put an end to the horrible slanders which I guessed only too well were even at that moment circulating from lip to lip; and the foolish girl was throwing a preliminary obstacle in my way.

"Tell Miss Telby I must and will see her," I said sternly. "And if she won't come down to me, I shall insist on going up to her."

The maid retired in a flutter, but came back shortly and asked me to follow her. I was shown into the Telbys' sitting room, and after a time Molly came in.

"I am sorry to seem peremptory, Molly," I began, "but it is essential that I should speak to you."

"It is not very kind," she answered, a distinct frown contracting her usually placid brow.

"Yes; it is kind. Please sit down."

She sat down with an obvious ill humor that brought her father to mind. "I did not sleep well last night," she said resentfully, "and I was having a nap when you called and disturbed me."

"You were up late last night?"

She gave me a quick glance. "Not very."

"It depends, of course, on what you call late."

"I went to bed at eleven."

I was taken aback. Did the silly girl mean to deny her unhappy escapade?

"Molly," I said bluntly, "what were you doing in Trefusis' room at one o'clock this morning?"

The color faded slightly from her cheek. "What do you mean?" she cried. "And how do you know?"

"I was there."

"You were there?"

"Yes."

She looked at me with her great eyes. "Do you intend to tell father?"

"Good heavens! no."

She sighed gently. "I am glad you don't think it your duty to tell father. People always seem to think it their duty to repeat disagreeable things.

There were a lot of people in that room, but I couldn't recognize any faces. Do you think anyone recognized me?"

"Yes," I responded grimly.

"Will—will they think it their duty to tell father?" she asked anxiously.

"Very possibly."

She sighed again. "I am afraid he will be cross."

"What were you doing there?" I asked, after a moment's interval.

"I—I went to see Mr. Trefusis."

"Why?"

She looked at me gravely, and shook her head.

"You must tell me," I insisted.

"I cannot. Please don't press me, because I can't tell you."

I rose. "Now look here, Molly, don't let us have any nonsense. A great many people saw you there last night, and it is sure to get about. And—and people will misunderstand. The only thing to be done is to explain why you went there."

"Do you mean that I must tell everyone the real reason why I went there?" she asked, with dilated eyes.

"Yes. What was it?"

"I can't tell you."

"You must tell me."

"I don't think it is very kind of you to press me when I say that I can't tell you."

I was baffled. "But will you tell Milly?"

"I shall tell no one," she answered, with decision.

I sat down again. "My dear Molly, you don't understand how serious the matter is. Trefusis is a blackguard. Do you know what he pretends?"

She shook her head wearily.

"That you went to his rooms because—you were fond of him."

I watched the blood surging over her face.

"He says that?" she asked.

I nodded.

"He—he says I went to see him, because I was —fond of him?"

Again I nodded.

"Oh!"

I waited for some further reply, but none came.

"Why did you go, Molly?" I asked softly.

She sat still, looking almost vacantly in front of her. The color had died away as suddenly as it came. "Why does he say that?" she asked at length. "I hardly know him. I cannot understand why he says that."

"Because he has a grudge against me, and he thinks it will hurt me. He believes we are engaged to be married."

She did not speak for some time, but sat gazing into immeasurable distances.

"I see," she said at length. "And people will believe him?"

"Possibly."

"They will think I am not—not a good woman?"

"Some might think that if we don't explain your true reason."

She was silent for so long that I grew impatient. And then she smiled—so sweet, so transcendental was her face that I recalled involuntarily the Sistine Madonna.

"And yet I cannot tell," she murmured. "I understand what you have said, and yet I cannot tell." She rose. "Thank you for calling. I am sorry I was cross at first. I see now why you came. Thank you."

She moved towards the door, but came back.

"This won't make any difference between you and Milly, will it?" she asked wistfully.

"No, no," I said hotly. "But, Molly——"

She shook her head. "Don't press me any more, Fred, dear. I understand everything,

though I am often so stupid at understanding things. But it is impossible for me to tell."

She went out of the room, closing the door softly.

I had congratulated myself that morning on my cool, clear brain. My pride was gone now. Frankly, I was in a state of the utmost mental confusion. I picked up my hat and made my way into the street. What was to be done? The only suggestion that rose from the depths of my clouded imaginings was to hunt out Trefusis and wring his neck.

I directed my steps towards my club, and in Pall Mall I ran across young Fletcher, who had been a guest of Trefusis' the previous night. He nodded in an awkward and shamefaced way, and would have passed on if I had not stopped him.

"Tell me," I said, "what happened last night after I left?"

He fidgeted, first on one foot and then on the other.

"Oh, well," he replied, "we had to take Trefusis to a hospital——"

"A hospital! Why?"

"His face got badly cut on some broken glass when you—when he fell on the table."

"Is he there now?"

"Yes; the doctor said he couldn't possibly sail to-day. You see, some vein or other had got cut, and he bled a good deal before we could get him seen to."

"He really did intend to sail to-day?"

"Oh, rather; he worried like anything when he found he couldn't go."

"Curse him," I said curtly, and turned to go. Fletcher touched my arm.

"I say," he said nervously, "we were blackguards last night. I am ashamed—I really don't know what to say."

"Were you in the plot?" I cried fiercely.

His obvious astonishment disarmed me. "What plot?"

"That lady was brought there by a despicable trick of that blackguard, Trefusis. It was all a put-up job by Trefusis and Beaumont to injure me."

There was an expression of incredulity on his face, which he tried in vain to disguise. "I am so glad to hear that," he answered after a moment's pause. "Of course, I guessed it at once. Oh, yes, of course, that explains everything."

I turned away, sick at heart. That is what my friends would say to my face, and even behind my

back, if they thought it would serve me. But they would not believe it.

I passed a restless night, and rose the next morning sick at heart. At breakfast I opened the *Morning Post,* and the first thing that met my eyes was a contradiction of the report of my engagement to Molly. I had entirely forgotten sending it to the paper, and I realized at once that I had unwittingly dealt Molly another damaging blow. Everybody would say I had broken off the engagement. The notification, coming at that moment, would be regarded, by an ever-growing circle, as absolute evidence of Molly's guilt.

I spent some days in a state of indecision, and the need to consult someone pressed on me more strongly as the days went by. But whom? There was my brother. His platitudes would drive me mad. There was Mabel. What sensible suggestion could I expect from her? I wanted someone with a clear head and a sympathetic heart, who would accept, without proof, the fact of Molly's innocence. There was only one person in the world who could help me; but she was at Caux. Still, there were steamers and trains.

I rang the bell. "Tarling, pack my bag."

CHAPTER XXI

MOLLY WRITES

I REACHED Territet after an uneventful journey, and took my place in the crawling *funiculaire* that climbs through vineyards the mountain side to Glion; changing there for the cog-railway that helps the lazy traveler on to Caux. As we zigzagged up through the mountains, my heart beat at the thought of so soon seeing Milly. I pictured to myself the little start she would give. Perhaps she would turn red, perhaps pale. At any rate, red or pale, she would receive me with some embarrassment, some touch of constraint. I felt that I should have to carry off the awkwardness of our meeting by the ease of my manner. Perhaps a little hauteur would not misbecome me. I was here to help her sister, rather than to see her. It was not the persistence of a rejected lover that had brought me from London—that I must explain, in a few well-chosen words, at the outset—but a disinterested desire to aid her unhappy sister, who, to use a vulgar expression, had "got herself into a hole." When she understood why I had

come, I could imagine her pleading eyes looking up into mine; she would hang on every word I uttered, depending on me so completely for advice—— But the train was nearing Caux.

Our meeting was not long delayed. As the train drew near the station, the first person I set eyes on was Milly. She was dressed in white (though the detail is not relevant), and she was leaning on the balcony of the platform, looking vaguely at the train crawling in her direction. She did not notice me till I had alighted and stood by her side.

"Why, Fred, wherever did you drop from?" was her greeting. So far as my observation went, she turned neither red nor pale.

"I have dropped straight from London," I answered.

"It's very jolly, anyhow." She looked at me with her bright, frank smile. "How pale you are looking! I'm afraid you've been working too hard."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes, you have," she persisted. "It's always the way with foolish people. They will rush to extremes. However, it's sensible of you to take a holiday. And how nice of you to come here. Are you alone?"

"Quite alone."

"Oh." Her eyes dropped.

We moved on towards the hotel. "What luck to meet you like this!" I said.

"They bring up the English mail about this time, and that always fascinates me. Look, there it goes." She pointed to a man with a bag over his shoulder. "You can have no idea how I long for news here. It's a shame to say it when the scenery is so beautiful, but for all that I am dreadfully bored. And so I go to meet the mail every day."

"Are you intending to stay here long?" I asked.

"I don't know. It depends on aunt. Are you?"

"That depends on you."

Her color deepened. "Oh, bother!" she observed.

"No; I don't mean that at all," I said in a great hurry. "Not in that sense."

"What sense?"

"Oh, well; you know!"

Her eyes met mine, and she laughed very naturally. I laughed too, but ruefully.

"You mean," she said, "you don't intend to be a nuisance?"

"No; certainly not." Hang it, why had I not worked in those well-chosen words? "The fact is, I came over to get your advice about something very important, and my movements will depend on what you think had best be done."

She was gratified. "You want my advice as to something important in your career? How splendid that you should have a career!"

"Well, it's not quite that. It—it concerns Molly."

She glanced up quickly. "And Mr. Vicars?"

"Bless me, no."

Milly seemed disappointed. "I thought perhaps something had happened, but nothing ever happens nowadays."

"About Vicars and Molly?" I asked curiously. "What do you want to happen?"

"What do I want to happen?" she repeated. "I don't think you need ask that! I want Mr. Vicars to ring at our front door and say, 'Molly, I've come to marry you.' And I want Molly to answer, 'Why, certainly.'"

"And won't she?"

"Not without papa's consent, which she never, never can get. By the way, have you forgiven Mr. Vicars?"

"Why, of course I have. That man Trefusis

was at the bottom of all those lies. I hope you've forgotten all that nonsense?"

She raised her eyes gravely. "Oh, yes, I've forgotten all that nonsense."

A pause ensued that lasted till we reached the grounds of the hotel. "But why are you so eager that Molly should marry Mr. Vicars?" I asked at length.

"Because they love each other."

"Is that a sufficient reason in all cases?"

She disregarded my question. "Poor Molly," she went on, a trifle hurriedly, "has such a hard time of it, simply because she is a martyr to that horrid mental disease, 'duty to one's parent.' She will miss happiness in this world simply because she won't say, 'Blow papa!'"

"It wouldn't be ladylike," I said reprovingly, but Milly did not heed me.

"Of course, Mr. Vicars isn't a hero, but she loves him. I know Molly's nature so well. She will never love anyone else all her life."

"I hope Molly will find happiness somehow or other," I said rather sadly.

We had reached the hotel entrance. A porter came up and handed Milly a letter.

"It's from Molly!" she exclaimed, and began to open it.

"Don't open it here," I interposed hastily. "There are so many people about. Let us go where we can be alone."

Something in my tone struck her. "There is something serious the matter?" she asked quickly.

"Yes."

Without another word she put the letter in her pocket, and we left the grounds of the hotel. She led the way to a path that struck across the mountain side. We came to a retired seat, from which we could see the Lake of Geneva, stretched out far below.

I watched her face as she turned over sheet after sheet covered with Molly's big, scrawling writing. The little dent between her eyebrows deepened.

"What *does* all this mean?" she asked, with a sudden glance towards me, as she turned a page. I made no answer, for I felt she had better get hold of Molly's version. Page after page she turned, and once she smiled, and my heart lightened. Suddenly, as she neared the end, she gave a startled exclamation, and a great wave of color flooded her face.

"He—struck her!" she cried, with a half sob. "He struck her! Oh, Molly; my beautiful Molly!"

"Who struck her?" I exclaimed, jumping off my seat.

"Father," she murmured. She finished the letter with burning cheeks and compressed lips. And then she rose, and turning away, dried her eyes with her handkerchief.

We did not speak for some minutes.

"Does she explain why she went there?" I asked at length.

Milly shook her head. She gathered up the sheets of note-paper that lay scattered about the seat.

"Shall I read this to you?" she asked.

"If you think it best."

She began to read the letter, but could not control her voice. "Read it yourself," she said, and handed it to me.

"My dear Milly," I read, "Oh, how I wish you were with me, for I don't know what to do or where to turn for help. I cannot live with father any longer. But where to go, I do not know. I have decided to go somewhere, but where, I do not know. If you were at home, you would know at once, but it is so difficult for me to settle things. But, in any case, I shall leave father.

"It has just occurred to me that I will settle

where to go by putting a hairpin in an 'A.B.C.' You remember old Mrs. Tarling at Trewint settles things by putting a latchkey in her Bible, and the text it points to is her guide—though she told me once it didn't always work. I think an 'A.B.C.' in my case will be better than a Bible, because it must settle something, and, I dare say, a hairpin will do just as well as a latchkey.

"I have done it! I am going to a place called Sanquhar in Dumfriesshire, in Scotland. There is a hotel advertised called the 'Queensberry Arms,' and I shall stop there. As soon as my box is packed I shall drive straight to the station, and I shall be in Sanquhar to-morrow. Father will never guess, nor will anyone. I tell you, because I want you to come straight to me and tell me what to do.

"Oh, Milly, things have been terrible! Late one night, it was past midnight, I went and called on Mr. Trefusis. This will shock you, *but I had to go.* I wish I could tell you why, but I have solemnly promised not to tell anyone. Oh, how I wish I could tell you.

"I was shown into a room by a man-servant, and I could hear the voices of men in the next room, laughing and talking. Suddenly the folding doors were flung open and a whole heap of

men's faces were staring at me. I was very much astonished and frightened. Then Mr. Trefusis shut the doors quickly, and I hurried away, and got into my cab, and drove back to the hotel.

"The next day Fred called on me. I am afraid I fibbed at first. But he said he was one of the men, and so it was no use. He said I must tell him why I went to Mr. Trefusis, and explained why. Oh, Milly, it is terrible for me to have to write this. He said people would think I was a bad woman if I did not explain, and that Mr. Trefusis was going about saying I was a bad woman, and that was why I had gone to his rooms. But, oh, Milly, you know it wasn't.

"I asked him why Mr. Trefusis said such wicked things, and Fred explained that Mr. Trefusis thought we were engaged, and he hated Fred, and so was trying to hurt him by saying I was bad. Fred begged me to explain why I went to Mr. Trefusis' rooms, but, Milly, dear, I could not. I saw Fred was very much moved, for he was pale and his lips trembled, and he hadn't that lazy, laughing, indifferent manner which you used to hate in him.

"The next day father and I went into the Park. You know how father loves to go into the Park and bow to people. We met Lady Maud Ponti-

cherry, and she took no notice of father's bow, and stared at me in the rudest way. We also met Sir Gerald and Lady Trewint, and they pretended not to see us, and then the Duchess of Hillstown, whom father was so pleased to know, stared right at us and never bowed in the least.

"Oh, Milly, I began to understand it was because they all thought me a bad woman!

"I did not say anything to father, who was in a terrible temper. He could not understand it. And, oh, I was so afraid he would find out.

"The next day we went to an 'At Home' at Mrs. Clive's. I did not want to go, but father insisted. It was terrible. Mrs. Clive shook hands so very coldly, and not a single woman spoke to me. But father was in a better temper, because the men spoke to him.

"The next day he found out. Oh, Milly, he came to me and asked if it was true, and I said it was. Then he asked why I went, and I could not tell him. I could not, dear, because I had solemnly promised to tell no one. Oh, you believe me, don't you? He was so angry—he struck me. Oh, Milly, Milly, if you were only here, I could bear it so much better.

"But I cannot stay here any longer. I am going away to-night to Sanquhar. You will come

there, won't you? I have plenty of money. Oh, Milly, it is terrible to be thought a bad woman! But even if I were bad, other women should not be so cruel. That would not be the way to make me good again.

"You will come soon, dear Milly? Oh, do come soon!—Your loving sister, Molly."

I finished the letter, and laid it down.

"When can we leave?" asked Milly, in a constrained voice.

"Not before to-morrow."

"At what hour?"

"Ten."

"I shall be ready."

"You will speak to your aunt to-night?"

"Yes, of course."

We moved slowly back towards the hotel. Milly turned to me suddenly.

"Have you any idea why she went to——"

I shook my head. "I was going to ask you the same question."

When we came to the gate that led into the hotel grounds, she stopped suddenly.

"How tired you must be after your long journey!" she said remorsefully. "And I have never even thanked you."

"I don't want any thanks," I replied. "Do you understand that poor Molly is suffering for me?"

She nodded. "He—he thought it was Molly you loved?"

"Yes. He made a mistake, for which I thank God."

She looked at me gravely. "I would to God he had made no mistake."

CHAPTER XXII

MOLLY RETURNS

I PASS over with few words the trouble we had that night with Milly's aunt. I have no doubt she was an estimable old lady, though she insisted on regarding me as a wicked young man, which is an awkward and embarrassing rôle to fill. I do not think we treated her with much tact. Milly introduced me in a somewhat casual way as Mr. Fred Trewint.

"I have heard of you," the old lady said severely.

I expressed my gratification, though the old lady's expression indicated that what she had heard was not entirely favorable. Probably she had studied the local papers at the time of the election.

It was not conciliatory of Milly—but she was obviously preoccupied—to announce briefly that she was leaving for England the next morning, in my company. The old lady's face was a study.

"A word with you alone, Millicent," she said, and led the way with great stateliness to another

apartment. When Milly joined me later she was in a state of amused exasperation.

"The dear old thing wants to come and chaperon you—or is it me?" she said. "I have had great difficulty in making her change her mind. However, I have promised to take her maid."

We left the next morning and traveled through to London without stopping. I could have wished the maid had remained behind, for her presence was somewhat a bar to our mutual confidences. However, we were able to discuss, at considerable length, our course of action.

"I shall go straight on to Sanquhar," Milly declared.

"But you can't go on living there forever," I objected. "What is to be your next step?"

Milly gave a little shrug. "I suppose I must see father and arrange something."

"I'll tell you what, Milly," I said, with sudden inspiration, "why shouldn't you and Molly stay with my sister-in-law?"

Milly stared at me. "I don't think that would be very pleasant," she replied frankly.

"Perhaps not; but won't it help?"

Milly looked at me thoughtfully. "I have been thinking how very injudicious it was of Molly

to disappear just at this time. I expect it has made things ever so much worse."

"Why shouldn't we pretend that she has been with my sister-in-law the whole time?"

Milly came over slowly to my view. "But what will Lady Trewint say? Perhaps she won't like it. In fact, I am sure she won't. You must remember that Molly, from her own account, has been cut by everyone, including Lady Trewint."

"That will be all right," I answered confidently. "To tell the truth, Mabel is to blame for the whole affair. It was in helping her I first incurred Trefusis' enmity——" I stopped rather abruptly.

"Was she the person for whom you 'burgled' Mr. Trefusis' rooms?" asked Milly guilelessly.

I looked at her in a startled kind of way. "I am afraid you know too much!"

"Seriously," said Milly, "I hardly like to put this burden on Lady Trewint. Of course, I realize how much her protection would mean to Molly, but——"

"Let me see Mabel, at any rate," I interposed. "Before I left town I wrote and told her the truth about the matter. I don't suppose she had received this letter when she met Molly. I expect to find her very eager to do all she can."

"Well, you must promise not to press her," said Milly.

When we reached London there was only time for Milly to catch the night express for Scotland. The maid I dispatched back to Caux.

I wrote a line that night to Mabel to say I should call at eleven the following morning. I knew Mabel well enough to recognize the wisdom of warning her before making a morning visit. The next morning when I called she received me, in a becoming tea-gown, with effusion.

"Oh, my dear Fred!" she cried, as I entered the room, "what agony of mind you have caused us!"

"Very sorry," I answered, nodding to Gerald, who was present.

"And where the devil have you been?" asked my brother, not returning my salutation.

"Oh, I had to run over to Caux."

"A nice kettle of fish you left behind you," he growled.

"Did I? You must remember I know nothing."

"Oh, Fred," Mabel broke in, "do, do tell us everything! Where is that Telby girl? She didn't run away with you, did she?"

"Bless me, no," I exclaimed, astonished.

"People have been saying all kinds of things," said Mabel. "Mr. Telby has absolutely no restraint, and he has let everyone know the girl has run away. Some say she went with you, and some say she is hiding till Mr. Trefusis is well enough to leave the hospital, and some declare she has committed suicide! Oh, my dear Fred, there never was such a muddle!"

Gerald eyed me sternly. "I know as a fact that you nearly killed Trefusis. A day or two ago the rumor ran through the clubs that he had died, and that a warrant was out for your arrest. I am not a nervous man, but I confess the news alarmed me. I rushed over to the Home Office to see the Home Secretary. Luckily he was able to reassure me, but I spent a very unpleasant quarter of an hour."

"I am very sorry."

"But where is the girl?" persisted Mabel. "Do you know?"

"Oh, yes; I know."

"Where is she?" they cried together. "Where has she been all this time?"

"All this time," I replied solemnly, "she has been under this roof."

They were silent in astonishment for a moment, and then Gerald burst into one of his paroxysms of abuse.

"As foolishly and feebly flippant as ever," he exclaimed, "although even at the moment the hangman's noose is round your neck. Frederick, you are incurable. Pray leave me."

"Not till he has told us everything!" cried his wife. "Now, Fred, dear, do be serious. Tell us everything right from the beginning. I received your letter, asking me to circulate that very thin story about Miss Telby being inveigled by a trick, and I have tried to do so. Frankly, it hasn't caught on. People say 'What trick?' and I have no answer."

"I know," I answered moodily. "That is what they would say. We must find out why she went there. It is our weak point not to know."

"Won't the girl explain the trick, if there was one?" asked Gerald.

"No."

"Hum." There was no difficulty in interpreting the expression on his face. "Fred, my lad, you've had a narrow escape."

I rose. "Gerald," I said solemnly, "you are utterly wrong. Miss Telby is as pure as our mother or your wife."

Gerald rubbed his nose dubiously. "Maybe, but circumstances——"

"I know all about that," I interposed im-

patiently. "And I want your assistance in explaining them. After all, you are chiefly to blame. I don't know what Mr. Telby and you thought you had arranged between you, but I am pretty sure these rumors of my engagement to Molly would not have been so persistent if you had not encouraged them."

Gerald seemed embarrassed. "It would have been an excellent match if she had only——"

"Possibly," I said, "but that is not the point. These rumors led Trefusis to injure her reputation in order to damage me."

My brother screwed up his face. "This story of revenge sounds very 'cock and bull,'" he replied. "Why should Trefusis want to injure you?"

"There were reasons," I replied evasively, aware that Mabel was in a state of nervous tension. "For one thing, we came into conflict at the election."

"Oh, of course!" said my brother. "You hired some roughs to duck him."

"I did nothing of the kind," I cried, with indignation, "though I know he thought I did."

"The same thing," replied my brother. "Well, no doubt that would not dispose him favorably towards you. Your story is that he

decoyed the lady he thought you were going to marry to his rooms, and revealed her suddenly, under compromising circumstances, to a crowd of drunken young men, in order to destroy her reputation and so revenge himself on you?"

"Yes," I replied. "These are the facts."

"Rather an elaborate reprisal for a simple ducking, eh?"

"Trefusis is not an ordinary man," I answered, "and he had other reasons for hating me—reasons which I can't go into."

My brother shut one eye. "I suppose that means you quarreled over some woman," he said coarsely. "Well, well, if that's the story, we must make the best of it for want of a better."

"Why did she run away?" asked Mabel. "That was so foolish of her."

"Her father—struck her."

Both Gerald and his wife were shocked. "Confounded brute!" cried Gerald.

Mabel put her handkerchief to her eyes. "Oh, the poor child!"

"So she went to a little town in Scotland, and there she still is," I continued. "I rushed over to Caux to fetch her sister. We came back last night, and she has gone on to Scotland to join her sister."

"You are taking a great interest in the matter," observed Gerald, regarding me curiously. "I hope you are not 'gone' on the girl after all."

"Not in the least."

"I'm glad of that," he said more cheerfully. "Well, what do you want us to do?"

I paused a moment. "I want Mabel to telegraph to Miss Telby, inviting her and her sister to come and stay here."

"Impossible," said Gerald unhesitatingly.

Mabel was silent, and I regarded her anxiously.

"Remember," I said in a low voice, "Molly has suffered for me."

Mabel came to a sudden resolution. "Why, most certainly," she replied. "I shall be most delighted if they will come here."

"Will you send a telegram?" I went to her writing-desk.

"Why, look here," expostulated Gerald, "I won't have this."

I handed Mabel a telegram form and a pencil without a word.

"You want her to come at once?" asked Mabel.

"Of course."

"I understand." She scribbled some words and handed me the paper. "Will that do?"

I nodded, and added the address. "May I

ring the bell?" I asked, and rang it without waiting for a reply.

"Am I a cipher?" protested Gerald.

The footman appeared. I handed him the telegram. "Let that go off at once," I said.

When the door closed, I turned to my brother. "I am sure you don't really object, Gerald," I said. "Remember what she has suffered, and if Mabel takes her up it will mean so much."

"Oh, I dare say," he grumbled, "but I want to know why I am to be entangled in the affairs of the Telby family."

"Well," I returned, turning, I expect, rather red, "there is one reason. The fact is I—I hope some day to—marry Miss Milly Telby."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Gerald. Mabel stood transfixed for a moment, and the next she was embracing me.

"Oh, Fred," she cried, "and you never told me! What is she like? Is she pretty?"

"She will have plenty of money, at any rate," observed my brother thoughtfully, "but at the same time——" He strode up and down the room.

"You see," I resumed, after I had satisfied Mabel as to Milly's personal attributes, "I want to put Molly right for my own sake as well as hers."

"Of course," acquiesced Gerald, "this makes all the difference." He frowned thoughtfully. "A scandal blows over very quickly in London. The girl must explain why she went to that man's rooms. People will believe anything, if it is put plausibly. But confound it, why did she bolt?"

"Why can't we say," suggested Mabel quickly, "that she has been here the whole time?"

"Why not, indeed?" I asked.

Gerald took hold of the idea quickly. "When can she get here?" he queried.

"To-morrow morning," I replied. "They will leave by to-night's train."

"I will take Molly for a drive in the Park to-morrow," said Mabel. "What a sensation it will cause! And I'll make a few calls this afternoon and tell a few people, in strict confidence, that she has been with me the whole time."

"Of course," I said modestly, "I am not yet quite engaged to Milly. I only hope——"

My gentle disclaimer was ignored. "Telby ought to be very much obliged to us," remarked Gerald, "for all the trouble we are taking to arrange his family affairs. And I shall see he does not forget it when the time comes for settlements."

"And, Gerald," said his wife, "as soon as the girls arrive you had better see Mr. Telby and tell

him they are here. It will never do for him not to believe our story. You must see to that."

"Oh, I know the brute!" returned Gerald. "As soon as he hears Molly is at our house, and knows about Fred and his other daughter, he will be as cock-a-hoop as possible."

It was a relief to feel that the matter was safe in Mabel's hands.

"Well, I must go," I said. "Thanks for all you have done, and will do. And, Gerald, really and truly, Molly is innocent."

"Of course she is!" cried Mabel indignantly.

"No doubt at all," responded Gerald dryly, "under these altered circumstances."

CHAPTER XXIII

MATCHMAKING

THE two girls arrived at my brother's house early the next morning, and my sister-in-law entered vigorously the same day upon her task of rehabilitating Molly in public opinion. The process Mabel adopted had, at any rate, the merit of directness. It was effective, too, amongst the circle that admitted her social leadership. She let it be known that no one who was not convinced of Molly's complete innocence need call at her house. It became at once an article of faith amongst her set that Molly was an "injured darling," and very soon no gathering was deemed complete without the lioness, or rather the lamb, of the hour.

Not a few misguided women, however, persisted in screwing up their faces when Molly drew near, and chief amongst these was the Duchess of Hillstown, who was reputed to consider herself the most virtuous woman in London. Mabel, with wonderful courage, took immediate steps to deal

with the recalcitrant Duchess, for she cut her Grace in a manner so direct as to throw a crowded drawing room into almost unveiled consternation. When the discomfited Duchess had departed, the hostess, distressed beyond measure, ventured to ask Mabel what she meant.

"I am anxious," responded Mabel sweetly, "to keep my immediate circle unexceptionable."

"But the Duchess is surely—surely most——"

Mabel shook her head sadly. "I always regard with grave suspicion a woman who is prepared to believe too lightly in the guilt of another."

Mabel's "cheek"—for there is no other word for it—staggered the Duchess, and helped to silence calumny. Everybody not the less believed the worst about poor Molly, but it was a victory for Mabel that they said so with discretion.

One day Tarling came to say that Mr. Vicars had called to see me.

"Oh, show him in," I said, greatly surprised. What could have brought him?

He came in, evidently ill at ease; and we did not shake hands. "I hope you will not consider I am intruding," he said constrainedly, when the door had closed on Tarling.

"It is no intrusion. Won't you sit down?"

He sat down, and cleared his throat nervously.

"I have come to ask you a simple question, and I will not beat about the bush. Perhaps you will think it a strange one, but I cannot help that."

"I shall be pleased to answer it, if I can."

"Then tell me where Miss Telby is."

"Is there any mystery about Miss Telby's whereabouts?" I asked, rather surprised that he had not learned what the whole of London had known for a week past.

He made a gesture of almost passionate appeal. "For God's sake, do not fence with me! Oh, I know you have cause to hate me, but do not let our past relations prevent your helping me now."

"Why do you come to me?"

"To whom else can I go?" he cried fiercely. "I have heard the miserable story which couples your name and Trefusis' with hers. I cannot get information from Trefusis, and so I come to you. I have sought for her in vain. If you know where she is, tell me. I want to go to her and tell her that I, at any rate, do not believe the lies that are in everyone's mouth concerning her." He rose excitedly. "She must need me now if she is in misery and alone. You have cast her off! You can have no reason now to keep us apart."

"Let us understand one another," I returned

slowly. "You say I have cast Miss Telby off. You have no right to say that; it is not true."

He stood and looked at me with something like terror on his face. "Not true?" he repeated; and then he sank back into his chair and covered his face. "I hoped—I believed there was good in evil; that a merciful Providence had allowed her to be the victim of these slanders merely that her unhappy engagement to you might be broken off."

"If Providence has so acted," I said dryly, "it has acted on insufficient information. I was never engaged to Miss Telby."

He raised his head. "Never engaged?" he repeated.

"Never. You have fallen into the same mistake as your friend Trefusis. I am not and have never been engaged to her, and at no time have we had any desire to be other than friends. I will admit," I added after a pause, "that I have a warmer feeling for her younger sister."

His eyes were full of doubt. "Trefusis told me that you had admitted your engagement."

"Then he lied," I replied briefly.

"Why should he lie?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "There was a feud of a kind between us. Poor Molly has suffered at his hands because he believed I loved her."

"Then you do not believe in her guilt?"

"No! She was enticed to his rooms by a trick. I don't know what trick, but I shall find out. I am only waiting for Trefusis to leave the hospital to force him to tell me the truth."

He shook his head. "He will never tell you."

Something in his tone struck me. "Why do you say that?"

"I saw him yesterday. If he has sinned, God has taken the punishment into His own hands."

I started, for I thought he meant Trefusis was dead. "Surely," I cried, full of a sudden dread, "his—accident has not killed him?"

"No, he is not dead. It would be better for him, perhaps, if he were. God has taken his reason from him."

I regarded Vicars with open mouth. "Do you mean that Trefusis has gone out of his mind?"

"It is so."

I could not speak for a time. "It is so unexpected," I murmured. "And yet—I wonder if it is!" I wiped my forehead. "What are they doing with him?"

"He has a mother in Australia. They are sending him to her."

I was gradually recovering from the shock the

news had given me. "Am I—was the accident in any way the cause?" I asked suddenly.

"I understand not."

"It is really a very sad business," said I, considerably relieved that I was not responsible. "It is curious that I have never considered him quite sane."

"You have not told me Miss Telby's address," said Vicars, evidently desirous of leaving the subject.

"She and her sister are staying with my sister-in-law, Lady Trewint."

He gave an exclamation of surprise. "Does she also believe in Miss Telby's innocence?"

"Of course," I said stiffly. "No one who knows Miss Telby believes otherwise."

"Oh!" He began to walk about the room. "I wonder if I may call on her?"

"Why not?"

He regarded me with almost eager gratitude. "Trewint," he said impulsively, "if I have misjudged you in the past, you must pardon me. I fear I have allowed myself to be made a tool of." He stopped suddenly and looked at his watch. "Will you kindly let me have the address?"

"Certainly." At that moment there was a ring at the door, which I guessed must be Milly and her

sister, for it had been arranged that we should go together to the Academy that afternoon. "I will do more than that; I will bring her to you."

I left the room quickly, and, forestalling Tarling, opened the door.

"Molly," I cried, even before she was across the threshold, "I have a visitor for you."

Her great eyes opened. "Not papa?" she asked affrightedly.

"Good gracious, no. Mr. Vicars!"

She gave a little sob. "Oh, what does he think of me?"

"He thinks what we all think, dear Molly, and he is dying to tell you so." I took her by the arm and led her to the sitting room door, which I opened. "Go in and talk to him, like a good girl," and I pushed her gently in, and closed the door again.

"I don't know what we are to do, Milly," I said. "I have only one sitting room, and that is engaged. We shall have to go and sit with Tarling in the kitchen."

"That will do very nicely," she made answer. "Perhaps he will let me make tea."

So we went to the kitchen, much to Tarling's astonishment. I expressed a fear that we were out of cake, and he discreetly disappeared.

"If that couple in the parlor don't emerge with everything fixed," I said complacently, "I shall be surprised."

Milly laughed. "I don't want to criticise, but, personally, I should not like to be hustled into a room, even to receive a proposal."

"I will adopt a different method in your case," I said.

"Oh, I shan't require any help," Milly replied hastily.

"Are you sure?"

"Don't let us talk any more nonsense," she said, coloring. "I want to talk seriously. Night and day I think about Molly. I lie awake wondering why——"

"So do I."

"There must be some explanation if we can only find it. Something quite simple and obvious. What is it?"

"I have given it up."

She stood with a tea-pot in her hand scrutinizing the interior rather critically, and then she sighed. "What a terrible mess!"

"The tea-pot?"

"Don't be silly. The tea-pot is all right, or will be, when I have removed the day before yesterday's tea-leaves. Why did Molly——"

"Is it any good discussing that question any more?" I asked, a trifle impatiently, for I wanted to speak on more personal matters.

"It is the only thing I care to talk about," she replied, "and until Molly is cleared I shall not talk about anything else."

It was my turn to sigh. "Oh, Milly——" I began.

"Where do you keep the tea? In that mustard tin? Let me see, how many of us are there? Mr. Vicars and Molly, and you and I—that's four, and the tea-pot one. Five spoonfuls. Have you a spoon?"

"I think there is one somewhere. But, oh, Milly——" I paused.

"You were going to make a remark," said Milly politely, "about Molly. What was it?"

"It wasn't quite about Molly."

"Yes, it was," she said threateningly. "Molly, Molly, Molly—always Molly till everything is explained satisfactorily. Now what were you going to say?"

"I haven't anything to say about Molly," I replied sullenly.

"Fred,"—she laid down the mustard tin, "don't be cross or stupid. I want to ask you something about——"

"Molly?"

"About Gilbert. I want to ask you whether you think he can know anything about the matter?"

"Gilbert?" I repeated. "Why, he was hundreds of miles away when it all happened."

"Then you don't think he has anything to do with it?" She seemed half relieved and half disappointed. "It seems wicked to think one's brother is in any way to blame, but the thought keeps coming into my mind."

"Has he heard of the—scandal?"

She shook her head.

"Write and tell him," I said briefly.

"Do you think I ought to?"

"Certainly. He is sure to hear, and it will be better that he should hear of it from you than from a stranger. And if he can throw any light upon it, I suppose he will do so."

"I will write at once," she answered.

At that moment the sitting-room door opened, and Molly and Vicars appeared.

"I ought, perhaps," said Vicars, with unusual nervousness, "to tell you that Molly has promised to be my wife."

I expressed great astonishment, and Milly hugged her sister. After I had tendered my congratulations, which were received with irritating

complacency by Vicars, we settled down to tea. When this was finished, Milly declared it was time to go home, and we all set off together. We walked through the Park, and it took a long time. When we arrived at my brother's house, we left the ladies at the door, both Vicars and myself deciding not to go in.

We walked away together, and neither of us spoke for some time.

"I need not assure you," he suddenly burst out, "that I have the utmost faith in Molly, but I will admit it would gratify me if she would tell me why she went to Trefusis' rooms."

"Did you ask her?"

"I hinted at my natural desire to know, but she would not tell me." His brow contracted slightly. "Of course, I did not press her, for I have implicit confidence in her. At the same time, it would be a satisfaction to hear her explanation."

"Oh, just so."

"Please understand, however, that my trust is absolute. Ah, there is my 'bus. Good-day."

CHAPTER XXIV

GILBERT'S STORY

MY brother was deputed to call on Mr. Telby and inform him of his eldest daughter's matrimonial intentions. He heard the news with little concern.

"I have already cast her off," he said.

Gerald had some little difficulty in making him understand that the house of Trewint had championed Molly's cause, and that she must be at once received back into her father's favor. As soon as Mr. Telby realized that Gerald was convinced of Molly's innocence he was quite ready to be convinced also. Gerald explained, at length, that Molly had been inveigled into Trefusis' rooms by a trick.

"Oh, a trick?" said Mr. Telby doubtfully. "Is that so, indeed?"

Gerald assured him that such was indeed the case.

"And—er—by what trick?" asked the anxious parent.

My brother waved an arm to signify details were unnecessary, and Mr. Telby did not pursue the subject.

"If you are satisfied, Sir Gerald, then I am, too," he observed. "And if Molly wishes to marry that—parson, she's welcome to do so. Under the circumstances, she cannot expect a better match."

"I want you to see Molly and explain to her that your doubts are at an end. I hope, too, you will meet Mr. Vicars on friendly terms. It will look better."

"Oh, quite so." Mr. Telby began to see that expediency pointed to an unconditional acceptance of the situation. "Of course, I want to help the unhappy girl—and the sooner she gets married the better."

One evening, on returning late to my chambers, Tarling intercepted me at the door to tell me that Gilbert had been waiting my return for some hours. I went into my sitting room and found him sleeping peacefully on the sofa.

"Why, Gilbert, this is a surprise!" I said, laying my hand on his shoulder.

He started up, rubbing his eyes.

"How late you are!" he cried. "And how you frightened me! I thought it was someone

come to take me to prison. I've been here hours. What time is it?"

I glanced at my watch. "It's past twelve. Where have you sprung from?"

"I got a letter from Milly, and I started at once. I have come straight here. But I mustn't keep you out of bed. I will go away, and come back to-morrow."

"You don't leave this house to-night," I said firmly. He was looking thoroughly washed out. I got him a brandy-and-soda, and a touch of color came to his face.

"Milly's letter frightened me. She asked me to see you if I knew anything about—oh, what a brute I have been!"

"Tell me about it."

He covered his face with his hands. "It was all my fault. I asked Molly to see Trefusis, and to promise solemnly to tell no one. I never guessed the man would be such a blackguard. Oh, when I meet him—if I dare—but I shan't dare!"

"You need not fear him any more," I replied. "He will not trouble us again."

"Oh, you don't know him! If I were not a coward, I should kill him! If I were not a coward——"

The despair in his voice made me feel both pity

and contempt. "How did Trefusis get you into his power?" I asked.

Gradually he told me the story, and a sordid story it was. His companionship with Trefusis had opened the door to many extravagances and other follies. He owed Trefusis and others of his set far more than he could pay. Beaumont, in particular, who had pressed money on him in the earlier stages of their acquaintance, became the most urgent in his demands for payment, finally announcing an appeal to Mr. Telby. The threat threw Gilbert into a panic, and he begged Trefusis for assistance to clear off Beaumont. Trefusis regretted his inability to help him personally, "being short himself," but hinted that Gilbert's own bill, if backed by a "good name," could easily be negotiated. He told Gilbert that it would not matter for what period the bill was—it might be for three years—if only it was backed by a substantial name.

Trefusis seemed to have played his cards skillfully, and by innuendo rather than by direct suggestion he put into Gilbert's head an easy method of shelving his difficulties for three years. At any rate, Gilbert brought Trefusis a bill at three years, purporting to be accepted by Mr. Telby.

It would be absurd to pretend that Trefusis did

not know that Gilbert had forged his father's signature. He must have known that a wealthy man like Mr. Telby would not hand his son an accommodation bill to hawk about. However, Trefusis took it without a word, and the cash was at once forthcoming. Whether the plot he finally matured was at that time in his mind, or whether he simply wished to get a hold over Gilbert—the only son of a wealthy man—I cannot say. Immediately after Trefusis' return from Trewint, at the close of the election, he sent for Gilbert and told him, with every appearance of concern, that the holder of the bill had discovered the forgery, and had determined to put the matter into the hands of the authorities, but that, at Trefusis' earnest entreaty, he had agreed to do nothing for a few days.

"Of course," Gilbert explained to me, "I thought it was a mere matter of finding the money, till Trefusis made it clear that the holder—he said his name was Leslie, but I don't believe now there was any holder except Trefusis himself—was determined to inform the police from a high sense of public duty."

I nodded. "A natural explanation. People always act from the highest motives when they refuse to be merciful."

"Trefusis seemed very much upset. He said if it had only been a matter of money, he would sell his shirt rather than allow any harm to come to me. You can imagine what a state of mind I was in. I was just starting for Egypt, but, as Trefusis explained, I could easily be extradited."

"It was thoughtful of Trefusis to remind you of that."

"The day before I left I saw Trefusis, and he told me that he had done all he could for me, but without success, and that I might expect to be arrested any day."

"And what did you say in reply to this cheerful information?"

He flushed a dull brick color. "I am ashamed of the exhibition I made of myself. I—I quite lost my head, and I—behaved like a schoolboy—or rather a schoolgirl, because a plucky boy would die rather than do what I did. I—broke down and blubbered, and implored Trefusis to help me and altogether—bah, I am sick when I remember it!"

"Your nerves were overstrung," I said consolingly.

"I wish I had shot myself," the lad resumed moodily. "I should have done so, if I hadn't been such a coward. Just when I had utterly given

up all hope, he told me very reluctantly that there was just one possible chance."

"And that was——?"

"He said that Mr. Leslie was a very upright and honorable man, but very obstinate—except to women. He went on to hint that if by some means Molly were to intercede for me, Mr. Leslie might relent."

"I see."

"Of course, I didn't like to bring Molly into it, but it seemed the only way. In the end, I wrote Molly a long letter just before starting for Cairo, telling her everything, and begging her to see Mr. Leslie, but asking her solemnly to promise to tell no one. I gave Trefusis the letter, and after I had left England got a line from Molly full of sympathy and affection, saying she would do what I asked, and especially promising that she would keep the whole affair an inviolate secret. I heard nothing more about the matter till I got Milly's letter."

To make an end of Trefusis and his methods, I may here say it afterwards appeared that he called at the Hotel Cecil and handed Molly Gilbert's letter, who, in her blind devotion to her brother, was ready to do anything. Trefusis pointed out that if Leslie knew that Molly wished to speak to him on her brother's behalf, he would

be certain to refuse to see her. He therefore suggested, and Molly willingly agreed, that she should call at Trefusis' chambers the next afternoon at three o'clock, when Trefusis would make every effort to have Leslie present.

Molly called at the hour mentioned, but only saw Trefusis, who showed her a telegram from Leslie saying he was detained. What was to be done? Trefusis explained that as Leslie was to accompany him to Australia early the next morning, it was impossible to arrange a further meeting. It was true, he admitted, that Leslie was staying with him overnight; but then, as the telegram stated, he was not to be back till after midnight, and it was of course impossible for Miss Telby to see him at such an hour. Molly, greatly distressed, jumped into the trap. She offered eagerly to call at any hour of the day or night to see Leslie, so that she might save her brother.

Molly kept her appointment by the simple expedient of descending from her bedroom shortly before the hour named, and requesting the night porter to summon a cab. Possibly the request surprised the night porter, if night porters can be surprised. At any rate, Molly got a cab and drove to Trefusis' rooms, with the results that have already been detailed.

CHAPTER XXV

THE END

WHEN Molly learned that her brother had made a clean breast of his share in the episode which had resulted in so much suffering to herself, it might not unreasonably have been expected that she would have welcomed her deliverance from an unpleasant suspicion. But this was not the case. So unreasoning was her devotion to her brother that the mere suggestion that Gilbert should bear the consequences of his own folly roused her to leonine wrath. Her anger directed itself chiefly against poor Vicars, who really had less than anyone to do with the unhappy affair. She was indignant because he would not exercise his authority and prevent disclosure of the true facts. When Vicars pleaded that he had no authority, and that, in any case, her good name was dearer to him than Gilbert's, she declared, in her anger, that she would never speak to him again, and that their engagement was at an end.

Vicars in his distress came to see me, thoroughly

cowed. "I think," he said, "we had better let things rest. As Molly points out, if the facts are known, it will mean a disgraced life for Gilbert. Besides, we shall live in the country. Really, I don't think the public have a right to a fresh scandal."

I am glad to say that Gilbert manfully declined to agree to this cowardly policy.

"Molly," he said slowly, "will not be cleared until it is known why she went to Trefusis' rooms. She went for my sake, and everyone must know it."

It was Mrs. Fielders who, with her usual acuteness, hit on the *via media* that was finally adopted.

"Why not tell the truth," she suggested, "every word of it, save that one word 'forgery'? Let us say that Gilbert was being pressed for money, and that Molly went to intercede for him. I think that will do well enough, especially——" she added in an aside—"as no one takes much interest in the matter since she has decided to marry a dissenting parson."

It was difficult to get either Molly or Gilbert to accept this suggestion, but at length, after a conference in Mabel's drawing room that lasted a whole afternoon, the proposal was agreed to by all parties.

As soon as the difficulty was settled I noticed

Milly slip away. I followed her, and found her on the balcony.

"Are you satisfied?" I asked.

"It is a compromise. Are compromises ever really satisfactory? Poor Molly!"

"But Molly is going to be very happy."

"Oh, yes," she replied brightly, "I feel certain her troubles are over, and she will be happy."

"There are others in the world besides Molly," I ventured timidly.

"I must go in," she said.

"Not yet, Milly," I begged. "You must hear me out. I asked you once to marry me, and you refused because I was unworthy. I am still unworthy."

Her face was turned from me.

"I suppose I am a compromise, too," I went on. "Good and bad intermingled, and the bad predominates. I slither along the surface of things with hardly a thought of their depth. Lately I have been trying to delve beneath the surface, but I have only made some pitiful little scratchings. I am afraid I remain very much as I have always been. On my merits I have no case, but I love you."

Her face was still turned from me, and it was long before she answered.

"You say you are unworthy of me," she whispered. "Oh, Fred, haven't you found me out yet? If you compare me with Molly, you will see how petty and superficial I am. I couldn't have sacrificed myself for Gilbert as she did."

"I don't want you to sacrifice yourself for Gilbert, I only want you to sacrifice yourself to me. Don't turn away from me, Milly, because I want to see your face. Give me your love, Milly, for I require your help. With you by my side, I think perhaps I can go on digging."

And then she turned towards me, and there was a look in her eyes which I trust will never pass away while life lasts.

"Fred, I love you. You know I have always loved you."

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